

**Yokozawa Takafumi
no Baai, Vol. 4**



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Yokozawa Takafumi no Baai, Vol. 4
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Contents

- [Disclaimer](#)
- [Main Body](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [See Also...](#)

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Chapter 6

Reaching behind himself to lock the deadbolt into place, Yokozawa Takafumi slipped off his loafers using his heels. “I’m home,” he called out to the empty apartment as he groped about for the light switch, a sight he’d grown used to of late. While he’d previously found this a rather lonely state of affairs, these days he had a picture frame given to him by Hiyori to keep him company—a collage of pictures she’d snapped during their summer trip along with a few of Sorata as well.

Just one glance at the frame, decorated gaudily with rhinestones and cute stickers, filled Yokozawa with affection, and while it was admittedly a bit embarrassing to have pictures including *himself* sitting around his room, it still left the whole space feeling just a touch brighter.

It was strange, though, how Sorata seemed to adopt such a dignified expression when posing for pictures for Hiyori; he’d always seemed so blasé around Yokozawa. Smiling to himself as he reminisced, he tugged his tie loose from his collar and rifled through his bag with his free hand, intent on taking care of preparations for the next day before

settling in for a bath. When he peeked into his bag, though, he froze, dumbfounded.

“I...forgot it.”

He'd meant to retrieve his cell phone to let it charge overnight—only to find it wasn't where he usually stowed it. He had returned home to his apartment after having dinner at the Kirishimas' place—so he must have left it there. While he likely would've never given its absence a second thought if he hadn't noticed it missing in the first place, the moment he'd realized he'd left it somewhere, he felt overcome with a strange sense of anxiety.

If he'd noticed sooner, he could've gone back to retrieve it while on his way home—but there was simply no time to do so now. Granted, he hardly ever received any calls or texts in the middle of the night on a weeknight, and any emergency contact from his family would come through his landline—he could surely go *one night* without his cell phone without the world falling apart. So while it would likely come back to bite him one way or another, having Kirishima bring the phone to him the next morning at the office was obviously the most logical route to take.

Taking his notebook in hand, he flipped through to find Kirishima's home phone number and called using his landline, noting to himself that it was probably a good idea in the future to keep the guy's cell phone number and email address jotted down somewhere for unexpected circumstances such as this.

"Yes, Kirishima residence!"

"Ah—Hiyo? It's me, Yokozawa." Hiyori had been the first to answer the phone. Almost forgetting to announce himself, so used to calling via cell phone as he was, he frantically reassured her of who he was.

"Oniichan? What's wrong? You never call on the house phone!" He couldn't blame her for being confused; he'd only moments ago told her good night and taken his leave.

"Sorry—I think I left my cell phone at your place. You don't see it around, do you?"

"Mmm, it's not on the table... I'll go look for it! Here's Dad in the mean time! Hey, Dad—Oniichan's on the house phone!"

"The house phone?"

*"Yeah, he forgot his cell phone, he says.
Here you go!"*

Kirishima took the phone from his daughter after a bit of back and forth. *"So, you forgot your cell phone? Pretty lame slip-up for you."*

"Yeah yeah, stuff it. I thought I had it in my bag." He paused to go back over the chain of events in his mind. He'd placed the device in his bag—but then he'd heard the sound announcing a new message and taken it out again.

"Well, I don't see it. Where'd you leave it?"

"I'm pretty sure it should be over by the sofa. It's not under the cushions or anything, is it?" He remembered at least checking his messages in the Kirishimas' living room. When he'd tapped out a response to the message, Kirishima had griped at him not to do work during off-hours, adding in a grating lecturing tone, *"It's because you go and respond that they send you shit like that at all hours of the night."* And while Yokozawa did agree that he had a point, his mind was filled with thoughts of work 24-7. He understood that it would probably be *more* efficient to have an on-off switch like Kirishima, but if it were really so easy to

just ‘turn off’ like that, he would’ve done so long ago.

Their exchange back then had forced thoughts of his cell phone from his mind, and he’d likely set it down somewhere and completely forgotten about it.

“It’s not under the cushions—and not buried in any cracks either. Hiyo—mind ringing up Yokozawa’s cell phone for me?”

“You just want me to dial his number?” A moment after she asked this, Yokozawa caught the sound of his own ringtone echoing over the receiver. As he’d suspected, it was somewhere in the Kirishimas’ apartment.

“Hiyo, can you tell where it’s coming from?”

“It’s coming from the sofa... I can hear it around here. What about you, Dad?”

“Ah—found it! Why the heck was Sorata on top of it...?” He could hear Kirishima offering an apology tinged with laughter over the phone, likely to placate Sorata who’d just had his nap disturbed.

“Thanks.”

"I'll bring it down to the sales floor first thing in the morning. You'll probably be there earlier than me, after all, right?"

"Just call me when you get there and I'll come up and get it from you myself." It was bad enough he'd had to ask the guy to bring in something he forgot; to make him bring the thing all the way to Yokozawa in person was just too much.

"Why waste time calling your extension? It'd be faster for me to just go there when I arrive."

"It's not like there's a huge difference in effort either way."

"Oh? Or what—maybe you don't want me showing my face on your floor—is that it?"

"That's not what..." Try as he might to deny it vocally, though...the guy was *kind of* right. Most everyone in the company now knew that Yokozawa and Kirishima were close, but they still had the details of their relationship under wraps—and Yokozawa had no intention of making that public knowledge any time soon. Plus, there was also the fact that Yokozawa had a few coworkers who seemed oblivious and carefree at first glance but who could be

surprisingly sharp on occasion; he couldn't deny that he'd rather they not see the two of them interacting. "Just—would you mind at least checking to see if I've gotten any new messages?"

"Tut tut, someone's being careless—asking another person for that kind of thing. You never know if I might just open a random message that catches my interest."

"Not like I've got any texts I give a shit about you seeing." Most of the settings on his cell phone were still in their default state; he hardly ever used the camera, and had no special ringtones or such set either. All he cared about was being able to make calls and send messages. All of the images in the photo folder were ones he'd been sent by Hiyori, even.

"...Ugh, what a boring-ass wallpaper. Want me to change it to a photo of my gorgeous self?" He could practically hear the leer in Kirishima's voice, and understanding fully well that the guy was only suggesting that to rile Yokozawa up, he opted not to get dragged along so easily tonight.

"Do whatever you want. I'll just change it back later."

“Y’know, you’ve been far less endearingly charming than usual lately.”

“Fine by me.” Trying to find anything remotely ‘cute’ or ‘endearing’ about Yokozawa in the first place was demented, in his opinion, and Kirishima was likely the only person in the world benevolent enough to deem him as such. It would really be a weight off of Yokozawa’s shoulders if the guy would up and realize how ‘peculiar’ his tastes ran.

“Aww, don’t be like that. Though I have to admit, your contrary nature is—in and of itself—charming in its own way.”

“I’m not being *contrary*—I’m telling you *exactly* what I feel!” He fought the urge to cradle his head in his hands at the unexpected response from Kirishima. It was times like this he wondered just where he’d gone wrong in life to get to where he was—but then something would always happen that would move him deeply, and he’d be reminded that there were always pros and cons to falling this hard for someone.

“C’mon, don’t get pissed. I was only teasing you a bit.”

“You...” Yokozawa’s face twitched at the shameless excuse, begging the question of *just how was that ‘a bit’?*

Perhaps sensing that he was in danger of very seriously tempting Yokozawa’s ire, Kirishima forcibly switched topics with, *“Oh right—I was supposed to be checking your phone... I don’t see any new messages or calls. Besides—I can’t imagine anyone’d be messaging you at this hour.”*

“I do get emergency requests for confirmation sometimes.”

“Do that shit the next day, then. You’ve managed to lose your phone for an evening—take a break from work, why don’t you?”

“Not like I can help it! It’s just—how I am!” His personality type was less ‘sensitive’ and more just flat-out ‘high-strung,’ and as things were, he’d rather be in a position to use his private time to take care of matters as soon as they became an issue than to stand there later saying *If only I had done this...*; it was just better this way for maintaining sanity all around.

“Well just—try to tone down the ‘workaholic’ side a bit, all right? You’ll work yourself

into an early grave pushing yourself like this all the time."

Being the butt of Kirishima's teasing all the time made these odd moments where he expressed genuine concern all the more awkward, and Yokozawa covered his embarrassment with a sharp end to the topic of conversation: "Don't be dramatic; just-bring me the phone tomorrow?"

"Yeah yeah, okay."

"Then...Good night."

"Good night; see you tomorrow." It was slightly strange—and a little awkward to boot—trading such benign niceties over the phone, and with a twinge of regret, Yokozawa softly replaced the receiver in its cradle.

"Is Yokozawa here?" It was rounding 9 AM when Kirishima appeared on the sales floor.

"What's wrong, Kirishima-san? Is there...something the matter?" Office hours on the sales floor were set, so most members of the staff were already at their desks—but hardly any of those working flex hours had made it into the office yet. Kirishima was

always one of the first to arrive at the office, eager to get a bit of work underway, but today he'd arrived particularly early, leaving Henmi to panic in assumption that something had happened again.

"Here for a delivery, as so ordered by Yokozawa."

At Kirishima's phrasing, Henmi's eyes flashed wide. "He *ordered* you?!"

"...Kirishima-san, would you *please* mind not using such scandalous turns of phrase that might be *misconstrued* by listeners...? I did not *order* you, I kindly *asked* you."

Yokozawa had to clamp down on the urge to release his rage verbally, instead lacing his words with a polite air. Were he to act on those urges, he'd just wind up seeming all the more childish in comparison to Kirishima to those around them. He knew he adopted a rather cocky, proud attitude when interacting with Kirishima in private, but a good portion of the reasoning for that could be chalked up to Kirishima's incessant provocation.

"Eh, what's the difference? Here—your cell phone. Try not to forget it again, would you?"



“Th–thanks...” The way Kirishima casually passed over the phone threw Yokozawa off his game; he’d been thoroughly prepared for a good round of teasing, but Kirishima seemed to withdraw rather easily this time.

“Well, catch you later. I’ll contact you about the fair later on.” And with a wave, he departed.

“Whew, that gave me a shock! I was shaking in my boots here, worried we’d screwed up again!” Henmi released a sigh of relief, apparently having been anxious that he’d committed some monumental screw-up without realizing it.

“You tryin’ to tell me you screw up *that* often?”

“Of course not! But I can’t say for 100% that I haven’t messed up somewhere unknowingly... Like before, you know?” At this, Yokozawa recalled how the entire sales staff had wound up having to clean up after a former staff member—now transferred to an affiliate company—had utterly bungled a project. While part of the fault had lain with them for not catching on to his mismanagement sooner, they’d all been utterly overwhelmed at the time. By this point, though, they’d managed to settle

everything and get back to standard operations, but at the time, every single member of the sales department had wandered around in a pale stupor.

“Have some confidence in your work. I’ve got your back; I’m not going to let anything like that happen again.” This was, in a way, a form of self-suggestion; Yokozawa was himself only human, after all, and he couldn’t say for 100% certain that he’d never screw up either. But regardless, they needed to all of them have a bit more confidence in their work. Most unforeseen disasters occurred as a result of negligence, and while he had difficult completely separating his private life from that in the workplace, maintaining a constant level of vigilance could only help decrease the incidence of such careless errors.

“That reminds me, Yokozawa-san... Where did you forget your cell phone? It’s really not like you to just forget things.”

“What’s it matter where I forgot it?” It just *figured* the guy would once again latch on to something annoying, he grumbled to himself, and when he averted his eyes, Henmi demonstrated his sharp sense of intuition.

“Ah! Wait, did you go to Kirishima-san’s place again?? Man, I’m so jealous! I wish you’d invite me along too sometime!”

Henmi seemed to have some sort of admiration for Kirishima, commenting at odd moments about how he wanted to be like Kirishima when he grew up. While Yokozawa wanted to counter this with reminders that he *was* ‘grown up’ already, he couldn’t bring himself to crush Henmi’s dreams for no reason at all, instead letting him babble on as he pleased.

After all, the only reason Henmi looked up to Kirishima was because he didn’t know the guy’s *true* nature. Ever since the two had grown closer, Yokozawa had found himself shocked on a fair few occasions; Kirishima had a surprisingly childish side to himself, with an annoying personality that led him to find true enjoyment in teasing Yokozawa.

“Then why not tell him yourself?”

“I could never be so shameless! I still get nervous just *standing* in front of the guy!”
He had a point; so long as Kirishima kept his mouth shut, he oozed this strange air of intimidation—which was perhaps why he made it a point to be as casual as possible at work.

“Sucks for you, then.”

“EH?! B—but you’re supposed to say stuff like, ‘Well then just leave it to me’ at times like this, aren’t you?!”

“Hell no. Now stop babbling and get back to work.” Henmi’s shoulders slumped at Yokozawa’s sound rejection, and he headed back to his desk.

Yokozawa was filled with a renewed sense of urgency to keep Kirishima from poking around in the sales department unless absolutely necessary; dealing with the blowback from any appearances he made was far too annoying.

He returned his focus now back to the proposal he’d been working on, intent on constructing some sort of springboard for discussion before the meeting later on. Typing away in a rather practical fashion, though, his mind wandered back to Kirishima’s attitude earlier. He’d been far more tractable than he usually was, even for being in public.

Wait—what if he’d done something to Yokozawa’s cell phone? Recalling their conversation the previous evening and how Kirishima had been griping about the state

of his phone's wallpaper, he slipped his hand into his pocket, drawing the device back out.

If he'd set some outrageous image as the home screen picture, it would be *very* bad if anyone else saw it, so just in case, he flipped open the screen under his desk, glancing at it quickly—but his worry had been for naught, as the screen was the same as it had always been. "...Guess I'm just over-thinking things."

It wasn't like the guy was the type to mess around *all* the time; he was the strange one here, acting as if having tricks played on him by Kirishima was an everyday thing.

Collecting himself, he returned his focus to the computer screen and set back to work.

"Ugh..."

The day had been packed with meetings and summons, leaving Yokozawa unable to attend to the work he'd had waiting for him back at his desk and with little choice but to put in overtime to see it finished. While he could have easily left it for the next day with no issue, finishing quickly with time to spare was easier on his nerves. He wanted to take

care of all this business beforehand—so that he could be sure to be able to leave work on time come Friday.

But he was too stiff just at the moment to soldier on, and rather than continuing to bury himself in his work, he deemed it likely a better idea to stretch his legs a bit. “I’m gonna take a break,” he announced, slipping his cell phone and some change into his pocket.

“Huh? You mean you’re staying longer?” Henmi asked, surprise clear on his face. It was probably hard for the guy to bring himself to leave so long as Yokozawa was still hanging around, and glancing around the rest of the floor, most of the other workers had already headed home for the day.

“I’ll head out after taking care of a bit more paperwork. You can go on ahead if you like.” It was his own damn fault he was still here, so it was hardly fair to ask his subordinates to do the same. Sure, there were some in the office who forced their underlings to keep up with their own pace, but Yokozawa wasn’t one of them, and while he did place value on the spirit of cooperation, too much pressure to conform and go with the flow was utterly inefficient.

“Then I’ll take my leave once I’ve found a good stopping point! It’ll be all downhill from here, after all.”

“I see. Well—don’t overdo it.”

Henmi snickered at the casual advice. “I could say the same thing to you! Please take sure not to work yourself too hard, Yokozawa-san.”

Yokozawa couldn’t stifle a wry grin at the remark. “Never thought I’d hear that coming from you. Guess I’d better take care, then.” He hadn’t expected to hear the same words Kirishima directed at him from his own subordinates. Maybe from an outsider’s perspective he really did seem to be driving himself too hard; a change in his lifestyle might bear some consideration, he pondered, and with a soft sigh, he headed toward the break room.

When he came to, he noticed his head was sitting at an odd angle—and the material propped under him was too hard to be a pillow, and a bit too tall as well. A bit woozy as he was, the time and location were hard to recall, and he couldn’t quite get a grip on just where he was at the moment. Rifling around through his mind, though, he

finally remembered heading into the break room for a short respite while working overtime.

He definitely recalled buying a coffee, thinking to inject a bit of life into his tired bones via some caffeine and sugar—but when he'd sat down, he'd suddenly been overcome with a wave of exhaustion and leaned over to rest against the wall. After that, though, everything was a blur, suggesting that he'd lost his battle with sleep.

He knew he had to get himself up and going again to get back to work, but he just couldn't shake the drowsiness, and just as he was fighting to keep his heavy lids open, a voice called out from somewhere above him, "You can sleep a bit more; I'll wake you in another 10 minutes."



Ah...okay then... he thought dully, fully prepared to give himself up to slumber once more—but the sensation of fingers threading through his hair snapped him back to reality in a flash. His eyes snapped wide open, bringing him face to face with Kirishima staring down at him. Before he could even ponder why *Kirishima* was here, though, he jumped up almost in reflex. “Wha—the...?!”

The sudden movement sent his head slamming into Kirishima’s chin, and with a dull *thunk*, they both quickly found themselves nursing their injured areas.

“Owwwwowowow...what the hell—that fucking hurt, you blockhead.”

“I could say the same for you! What the hell are you doing?!” His tone reflected his panic at the unexpected situation he’d found himself in. He’d just woken up, too, to make matters worse—and so he hadn’t quite managed to organize his thoughts just yet.

“Whadya mean ‘what am I doing’? Letting you sleep on my lap. *Duh*. You should’ve seen the position you were trying to nap in. I kindly loaned you my lap as a pillow, though, and this is the thanks I get?”

“Don’t take that condescending tone with me.” It wasn’t as if he’d *asked* for Kirishima to do such a thing, and even though most everyone in the office had already left for the day, they really ought to be more discreet considering that more than a few editors were still hanging around.

“You saying I wasn’t comfortable?”

“That’s not the issue, for one, and *hell no* you weren’t comfortable for another!”

“Come now, we mustn’t be picky; it was better than no pillow at all, right? Mr. ‘about to topple out of the chair he was sitting in’?”

“Then you could’ve *woken me up*.”

“Why the hell would I do that? Not like I get to see you in that state all that often, after all; wanna see?” He whipped out his cell phone here to show Yokozawa the picture he’d apparently snapped. It was indeed a sight to be seen, but surely there was no reason for the guy to take a picture and then force him to see it.

“I keep telling you—*don’t take pictures of me like that*. When are you gonna get it through your head?!” His indignation rose, shame and disgust mixing in a whirling battle for

dominance in his mind. The exhaustion that had befallen him moments before was nowhere to be seen now.

“C’mon, this is nothing—you’re a man, so pull your panties out of your ass. You’d be a hell of a lot more popular if you’d learn to stay cool and collected.”

“I don’t wanna hear that from you...” His temple began to twitch with irritation, and reminding himself that blowing up would only be playing into Kirishima’s hands, he gulped down the rest of his now-cool coffee in one go. He’d come into this room for a respite, but putting up with Kirishima had sapped his strength once again. He *really* wished the guy would grow up and stop teasing so mercilessly.

“Oh, and just so we’re clear: I’m fine with being able to use an arm as a pillow in return for lending you my lap.”

The casually bold manner in which he offered this exchange led Yokozawa to respond in much the same mood. “...Whose arm?”

“Yours.”

“...For who?”

“Me.”

After pausing to consider this for only a moment, he quickly snapped back to himself. “Who the hell would...?!” He’d only imagined it for a flash, but that instant had proven so stomach-churningly disgusting his thoughts had screeched to a halt. He couldn’t wrap his mind around Kirishima’s mentality that he would request something like that so casually. Lap pillows, arm pillows—these weren’t the kinds of things men passing 180 cm in height *did* for one another.

“Aww, c’mon—just for a little bit? It’s not fair that Sorata gets to have all the fun; I wanna get in on the action some too.”

“Don’t get *jealous* over a *cat*!” It was hard to tell just how serious the guy was being on this point—there was always the possibility he wasn’t joking in the least with Kirishima, and he took a small step back at Kirishima’s sullen, serious expression.

“I’m not *jealous*, just...envious, that’s all. If the arm’s a no-go, I’m fine with your lap, too.”

Trying to admonish someone like Kirishima who was deaf to all argument was a mistake

in and of itself, so it was best not to attempt such pointless things in the first place. "Stop hanging around here and get your ass home; Hiyo's waiting for you, isn't she?"

"My mom's over tonight, so she'll be fine. I had a ton of meetings today, one right after the other, so it's taking me forever to get through the work on my plate. I don't wanna leave it til Friday, though, so I'm trying to get it done while I can."

"All the more reason not to piss around like this."

"Hey, everyone needs a break now and then, right?"

"How the hell is this a *break*...?"

"Whatever; at least I got to see you, and that's enough to make me feel better. I'll compromise with your shoulder—so give it up."

"Shoulder?" Instead of responding, though, Kirishima simply gently settled his head against Yokozawa's shoulder, and while the sensation of his hair brushing lightly against Yokozawa's ears and neck was a bit ticklish, he bore it silently.

“... Yeah, you’re pretty stiff.”

“If you’ve got a problem with it, I’m happy to take it back.”

“Just offering my opinion.”

Yokozawa couldn’t imagine the position to be in any way comfortable, but Kirishima continued to settle his weight against him, the feeling of his breathing in such close proximity proving a strange sensation indeed.

“Yokozawa...never lend your shoulder or arms or lap to anyone else but me, okay?”

“... You’re the only one who’d ever want them in the first place.”

“You think so?”

“I do.” He couldn’t help the soft chuckle that escaped at Kirishima’s ridiculous worrying, and tugged along with the gesture, Kirishima’s shoulders shook with mirth as well.

“Ngh...what the...?”

His cell phone was ringing shrilly from beside his pillow—apparently he *hadn’t*

mistaken it for his alarm. Yokozawa squinted his eyes in the darkness as he checked the time; it was morning, but only just barely, and he still had some time before he needed to wake up. "...The fuck is calling at this hour..."

Depending on who it was, he had a good mind to cut short the call without even answering, but when he flipped open the screen and saw the caller's name, he balked.

Where the caller's name should have been were merely the word 'Darling~♥' and a shot of Kirishima striking a pose with sparkling stars and hearts gaudily decorating the image. "...The *hell* is the big idea...?!" he snarled into the receiver after punching the 'answer' button, but all he received in return was amused laughter.

"Gooood morning. Did you have sweet dreams?"

"Forget that—what the hell is this?!"

"Hey, you're the one who told me I could do whatever I wanted. And I'd like to remind you that since you knew it was me calling, it means you must accept the fact that I am indeed your 'Darling'."

“Stop fucking around—and what the hell do you want at this hour?!” There were still another good 20 minutes before he needed to wake up, and he wasn’t pleased in the least to have his precious morning slumber disturbed like this, his anger on the edge of explosion.

“It’s your wake-up call, of course. You weren’t noticing the little joke I’d played, so I had to take matters into my own hands.”

“.....” Realizing that this had been the only reason he’d called to wake him up so early in the morning, Yokozawa couldn’t even summon the energy to be dumbfounded.

“Pretty awesome picture, huh? Hiyo took it for me and—” He cut the call short with the press of a button, in no mood to listen to Kirishima’s nonsense, and navigated back to the address book to edit the entry.

“That asshole, why does he always... A guy his age, pulling shit like this is just...” Muttering to himself, he turned off the picture-showing setting and then moved on to delete the image itself from his data folder entirely—

—and then paused. “.....”

There...really was no need to delete the image, now that he thought about it, and he snapped his cell phone shut. Burying his face in his pillow, he felt overcome with a wave of exhaustion.

When was this guy gonna get tired of throwing him for a loop like this? Equally shocking, though, was how despite being pissed from the core of his being at the man...he couldn't bring himself to be entirely put off at his actions either.

"...Guess this is what they mean by 'love makes you weak', huh..."

In an effort to forget about these emotions he knew nothing to do with, he flopped back down on the bed. His alarm was set, so he had at least another good fifteen minutes to sleep—and not knowing that, an hour later, he'd sorely regret going back to sleep, he slipped off once again into slumber.

Chapter 7

Yokozawa peeked into Hiyori's darkened room, creeping close to her bedside by the light streaming in from the hallway. Turning on the light near her pillow with a soft *click*, he carefully examined her pallor; her cheeks that had been flushed darkly had once again

returned to their usual pale pink, and she looked leagues healthier than she had. Even her breathing now as she slept, previously labored and wheezing, had calmed compared to her state earlier that afternoon. From the looks of things, it was clear she'd at last recovered, and Yokozawa felt a wave of relief wash over him.

He gently peeled away the cooling sheet from her forehead and tugged the futon, which had begun to slide off her body, up around her shoulders. Sorata, who'd been curled up at the foot of the bed, rose to his feet to make his own inspection.

"She's sleeping well now, so don't you dare wake her up." Apparently she'd walked home in a sudden shower that had struck on Friday afternoon and wound up catching a summer cold. Summer this year had been absolutely sweltering, but Hiyo hadn't seemed affected in the least—and yet as soon as summer vacation let up, it was as if all of the exhaustion that had been building up inside of her hit her in one fell swoop.

He'd heard that she'd taken with fever fairly often when she was little, but this was the first time Yokozawa had ever seen her laid up in bed like this since he'd started coming by the Kirishimas' apartment. He'd been out

of his mind with worry, but the doctor had assured him that if they just made sure she got plenty of proper nutrition and rest, she'd be good as new in no time.

Her school was going to be holding an outdoors session later on at the end of the month, and she'd been supposed to spend the night that evening with some friends from the same classroom group to practice preparing the curry they were going to cook during the outdoors session, but it had now been rescheduled for the next weekend. Hiyori had been over the moon with excitement and seemed heartbroken at not being able to spend the night, but she needed to recoup her strength first. If she pushed herself too hard and wound up not being able to attend the outdoors session altogether, that would've been just intolerable.

"Sorata—don't sit there, you're crushing her." The cat had settled his paws against her shoulder to peer down into her face. Sorata had originally been his own pet, but after having the Kirishimas look after him when he wasn't feeling well, the cat had wound up making this place his new home. Yokozawa had hesitated to drag Sorata back to his own place, seeing how well he and Hiyori were getting on, and before he knew

it, Sorata living here had become almost a given.

It helped that Kirishima and Hiyori both had assured him that it was fine for Sorata to stay here forever, even, fawning over the cat—and Sorata had to be enjoying himself more in his new abode, no longer left alone for long periods of time as he had been at Yokozawa's place.

However, he couldn't let the animal bother Hiyori now that her condition had finally settled, and he scooped Sorata into his arms to carry him back into the living room—at which point Hiyori sensed him and opened her eyes. "Oniichan...?"

"Ah, sorry—guess I woke you up. Was I too loud?"

She shook her head slowly, eyes reflecting her just-woken state. "No... I think it's cause I was thirsty." She wasn't coughing anymore, but her throat did sound a bit scratchy.

"Then how about a drink? Can you lift yourself up?"

"Yeah." Sorata, having been set back down on the bed by Yokozawa, once again took

his place at Hiyori's side, and Yokozawa took his own seat in a chair beside the bed, helping Hiyori sit up.

"All right, now take your time drinking."

"Thanks." He passed a mild sports drink to Hiyori after she'd arranged herself in a sitting position. She must have been parched indeed, as the moment the straw touched her lips, she downed half the contents in a single gulp.

She liked to call him *Oniichan*, but they were by no means blood-related siblings as the term suggested; she was, in actuality, the daughter of Yokozawa's partner. Between being invited into her home and treated to dinner, even having her look after his sick cat—somewhere along the way they'd grown rather close, and he and Sorata both enjoyed an almost familial relationship with her now. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't feel bad anymore at least, and my head doesn't hurt now." She'd lost much of her appetite due to the cold leaving her feeling out of sorts, so she hadn't taken in much solid food today at all. She'd managed to take a good three bites of the vegetable gruel Yokozawa had prepared, but that was all she'd seemed able to keep down.

“Not hungry, are you?”

She shook her head gently at his question. “I had some jello earlier, so I’m not hungry.”

Yokozawa now recalled Kirishima mentioning earlier that he’d had her eat some jello when she’d woken up.

It had become something of a tradition now for Yokozawa to head straight over to the Kirishimas’ apartment every Friday after work, and picking out treats for Hiyori every week was something Yokozawa took great joy in. This week, he’d brought her jello with chunks of real fruit in it from a famous fruit stand; he’d wavered between the jello and roll cakes, but he was glad now to have ultimately gone with the more refreshing of the two.

“How’s your fever? Do you feel hot?” When he laid his hand gently against her forehead, he could tell her fever had come down quite a bit. At this rate, she’d be back to as good as new by tomorrow morning.

“Not so much anymore. But your hands are chilly, Oniichan—they feel good!”

“You think?”

“Hehe, and Sora-chan’s paws are soft and feel good, too,” she chuckled, gently squeezing Sorata’s front paws as he sat atop her lap.

“I’m gonna take your temperature, just to be safe. Do you mind?” He slid the thermometer into her ear and pressed the button, greeted moments later by a soft beeping. “..36.8, huh. It’s come down quite a bit; at this rate, you’ll be good as new by tomorrow, I’ll bet. You’re probably bored out of your skull laid up in bed like this, but it’s only for a little longer.”

“Yessir~”

Yokozawa’s eyes crinkled with mirth, and he patted her head at the polite response. While Hiyori could certainly come off more mature than her age suggested, she also could show a rather childish side at times as well. Perhaps because she’d been feeling under the weather, today she was being a bit more needy than usual.

“...Hey, Oniichan—where’s Dad?”

“He was in here not too long ago—but he’s in the bath now. Want me to get him for you?”

“Nah; I’ve got you and Sora-chan here, so I’m fine. Will you stay with me a little longer...?”

Yokozawa felt an unconscious smile twitching at his lips at the way she looked with her eyes turned up at him, leading him to wonder if this feeling was what they meant by the phrase “the apple of one’s eye”. “Don’t you fret; I’ll stay right here until you fall asleep.”

“Thank you, Oniichan–Sora-chan.”

“Now get some rest and get your strength back.”

“Okay.” She settled back down, and Yokozawa pulled the covers up around her again, turning the light down a notch. However, just sitting silently by Hiyori’s bedside left him feeling a bit bored, and he offered, “... You want me to read you a book?”

“... Oniichan, isn’t that something a little more appropriate for *younger* children?”

“... Well now that you mention it, I guess so.” When he stopped to think about it, he realized that fifth graders were a bit too old to have books read to them, and he flushed

in shame as Hiyori snickered softly at him. Hiyori was the only girl her age that Yokozawa knew, so he often found himself at a loss as to just how to deal with her appropriately.

“Mmm, you know, on second thought, maybe I *do* want you to read me something. Will you read me a picture book, Oniichan?” she prodded, teasing obvious in her tone; it seemed she hadn’t missed his embarrassment from her earlier pointing out of the inappropriateness of his suggestion.

“Don’t tease your elders.” If she was feeling well enough to joke around like this, though, it suggested she was doing quite a bit better indeed. “I won’t read you any books—but I’ll make you anything you want to eat tomorrow. Got any requests?”

“Hmm, theeeen...pudding! I want to try that one we saw on TV the other day!”

“The other day?” He rifled through his memories at her description. “Oh—the one with apple slices in it?” If he recalled correctly, it had been a baked pudding stuffed with caramelized apples. If he checked the program’s website, he could probably find the recipe, and he began pondering whether or not he could manage it

with the ingredients on-hand in the apartment.

“You...think it’ll be too hard to make?”

“Hmm, I think I’ll manage somehow. But I better not hear a peep of complaint out of you even if it tastes like crap, got it?”

“But *everything* you make is delicious!”

“If you say so.”

“The hamburg steak you made before was really good too!”

“That’s because you helped out with it—you kneaded the meat and put together the sauce, too, remember?” All Yokozawa had done was slice up the onions and tend to the parts of the recipe that required working the stove; he’d mostly only been watching from the sidelines.

“Let’s cook again together, ‘kay?” Her words took on a slight lisp now, probably because she was getting tired, and her heavy blinking made it seem as if her lids could slide shut at any moment. Her speech trailed off, and a short while later, the room was filled with the sounds of her quiet breathing.

“...Night,” he offered softly, rearranging the covers once more. Recognizing that having Sorata by her side would help keep her from feeling lonely when she woke, he gave up trying to remove the cat from the room. “Take care of her, will ya?”

He silently pushed himself up, being careful not to make a sound, and exited the room. As he stepped out into the hall, he found that Kirishima had come to check up on his daughter. Yokozawa had encouraged him to relax while taking his bath, but it seemed he’d only jumped in and quickly gotten out. “How is she?”

“Her fever’s gone down, and she’s feeling much better. She just went to sleep, though, so keep it down.”

“I see...” He peeked in through the crack in the door to check her features before quietly closing it again. This was Kirishima Zen, acting Editor-in-Chief of Marukawa Shoten’s monthly magazine *Japun*. He was the leading hit-maker in the entire company, well-respected by all his subordinates. In private, though, he was a doting father to his daughter, and despite losing his wife to illness some years before, he’d raised Hiyori into a fine girl. “Still, it’s been years since she got a fever—really caught me off guard.”

“Really? You seemed perfectly even-keeled to me.”

“Well I can hardly let myself go to pieces in front of Hiyo. I’m just glad it was only a cold—some people can catch the flu in summer, after all.” The small mercy with the whole affair had been the fact that she’d fallen ill over the weekend; thanks to that, they’d been able to nurse her back to health without any distractions, at her side constantly. “Thanks, really. For everything. It really helped, having you here. I probably couldn’t have handled it all on my own.”

“Just returning the favor; you helped me out back then with Sorata, remember?”

Yokozawa was certain that even if he hadn’t been there, Kirishima could have always sought help from his own parents, who lived just around the corner; but...it still filled him with a swell of happiness knowing he’d been the one Kirishima depended upon.

“Yeah, but...still, thanks.”

“...Well, how long are we gonna stand around here for? We don’t want Hiyo waking up.” He knew he should have just offered a *you’re welcome*, but being shown such honest gratitude was somehow strangely embarrassing. He could feel

Kirishima smiling at him from behind, but knew that if he turned around to confirm as such, he'd reveal himself in his own expression, and therefore kept his back to the guy, heading straight for the kitchen.

It had been one stormy night that had so suddenly brought together Kirishima and Yokozawa, who'd never before traded more than a few words outside of meetings. Heartbroken and desperate for some outlet for the emotions pent up within him, Yokozawa had tried to lose himself in bottles of booze when Kirishima had approached him. Despite rarely sharing more than the occasional greeting at the office, Kirishima had forced the drunk Yokozawa to grant him a seat beside him and proven a rather irritating conversation partner—and when Yokozawa had regained his senses, he'd found himself sharing a hotel room with the man. He'd been shocked enough to find himself sleeping in the nude—but his heart had almost stopped in his chest when Kirishima had stepped out of the bathroom, fresh from the shower.

Since then, they'd been through more than a few adventures—but perhaps the most surprising of all had been finding himself starting a relationship with Kirishima. Truthfully, it was *still* kind of hard to

believe that he'd find himself so intimately involved with someone he'd previously almost never interacted with in the office.

Rest assured, though, that this sense of disbelief was not out of some sense of unease in their feelings for each other or any sort of mistrust—it was simply...that it made him think sometimes that this whole situation was like something out of a dream, and Yokozawa's inability to shake that feeling was likely because he was just *so damn happy* right now.

His time spent at Kirishima's place was laid back and enjoyable; his only daughter, likely at a difficult age herself, had taken to him quite fondly, and they treated him like a member of their own family. It was truly a dreamy life.

And perhaps that was why he still occasionally found himself being caught off guard by Kirishima's words and actions; this kind of life had become normal, *expected* to him now, perhaps best described as something of a 'windfall', a stroke of luck.

He tugged open the refrigerator door, checking whether or not they had the ingredients for the pudding Hiyori had requested, when he felt someone draw up

close behind him, refusing to step away to leave him any room and rousing feelings of irritation. “You really didn’t have to follow me all the way in here, you know.”

“I just came to get a drink, that’s all; what, are you *that* sensitive to my presence?”

“H—hell no.”

“Yeah right.” A knowing leer spreading over his handsome features, Kirishima brushed past Yokozawa to reach into the fridge and retrieve a bottle of oolong tea. The kitchen itself was actually pretty big, but with two men pushing 180 cm in height standing next to one another in it, the space felt kind of cramped. “What’re you doing?”

“Hiyo said she wanted to eat some pudding, so I came to check the ingredients.”

“Your pudding’s her favorite food now, you know.”

“Pudding is pretty much *any kid’s* favorite food. She said she wanted some with apple slices in it; are there any left?”

“Plenty; I actually tried peeling one myself earlier, but geez—I suck at it; hardly any was left when I finished.”

“Oi—what the hell were you thinking? What if you’d hurt yourself?” The guy could barely wield a knife properly; he had to be out of his mind. He really wished Kirishima would try things like that where he could *monitor* him.

“Oh? Worrying over me?” His lips quirked into an amused smile, leaving Yokozawa to realize his error in phrasing.

“Hell no—if you fuck up your hand, it’s gonna come back to bite me in the office, though. The sales force is who’ll have to pick up the slack for you not pushing out books at a proper pace!”

“Classic *tsundere* response, right there.” The sight of Kirishima’s shoulders shaking with repressed laughter sparked Yokozawa’s irritation further.

“Th—that’s not what I...”

“All right, all right—I’ll cut you a break. So—what’re your plans for tomorrow?”

Having Kirishima apply any interpretation he damn well pleased to Yokozawa’s words left him with a bit of indigestion, but he knew full well there was no way he could win against the guy like this. He’d learned

well over the past six months or so that it was best not to join any fight he knew he couldn't hope to win to begin with. "Nothing in particular; with Hiyo like that, it's probably best we don't go out shopping." They'd discussed heading out on Sunday to pick up everything she would need for the outdoors session, but it wasn't a very good idea to push their luck when she'd just recovered from an illness.

Weekends with no plans in particular were by and large spent at the Kirishimas' place these days. Sometimes they went out as a trio, and other times Hiyori would go off to play with friends and the pair would head out shopping on their own; still other times, they would simply sit around the house all day.

"True; can't have her cold coming back, after all. Might be a good excuse to clear out the DVR, then."

"She didn't really eat much of anything today, so I'll have to make sure I prepare something nice and nutritious. What about you? Anything you wanna eat? Which reminds me, I'm starving... Maybe I'll make a late-night snack."

Yokozawa had made vegetable gruel earlier for Hiyori, who hadn't had much of an appetite, and he and Kirishima had enjoyed that for dinner—but as expected, it just hadn't been enough to satisfy completely.

“As a matter of fact...there is something I want. But I'm gonna hold back for now.”

“Why the hell would you do that? What—worried about your waistline?” He recalled here that Kirishima had been grumbling a few days earlier about gaining too much weight, and while Yokozawa couldn't tell where he'd put on any pounds, if anywhere, he supposed Kirishima was at an age where that kind of thing bothered him.

“...God you are *really* thick,” Kirishima murmured, a sigh laced in his words.
“You're not playing dumb on purpose, are you?”

Yokozawa's brows drew together at the insinuation. “Playing dumb about what?”

“...You seriously don't get what I'm saying?”

“Saying about *what*, dammit?” he pressed again, irritation rising when Kirishima refused to give him a straight answer.

“I’m talking about *you*, idiot.”

“Me?” He couldn’t connect this response with the initial question in any way, and he raked his gaze over Kirishima, confusion evident on his features.

“...If still don’t get it now, then I guess that means you’re really not playing the adorable airhead, huh? How about I put it this way: *I want you.*”

“.....?!” Yokozawa’s heart took a direct hit from the words dropped like a bomb before him. Reflecting back on their conversation, Kirishima’s innuendo had been far from subtle—and Yokozawa couldn’t negate the fact that he was, indeed, quite thick.

“I’d *really* love for you to start being able to read between the lines a little better... You’re ruining my strategy here.”

“You...don’t need any stupid *strategy*.”

“Is that your way of saying ‘just come and get me’, then?”

“You know that’s not what I m–*hng*.”

Kirishima took him by the chin and stroked a thumb over his lips suggestively. A shudder jolted up his spine, and Yokozawa took a leap backwards.

“Geez, you don’t have to react like that—I’m not gonna just *jump you*.” With a flirtatious rake of his gaze over Yokozawa, he downed the rest of his oolong tea in one gulp before sauntering out of the kitchen.

“Wha...” Yokozawa felt a flash of irritation rise up within—what was with that attitude after having the nerve to rile someone up the way he had?—but he knew if he protested the departure in any way, he’d just be fueling Kirishima’s fire. Besides, with Hiyori laid up in bed with a fever, they couldn’t afford to disturb her.

He could still feel Kirishima’s fingers on his lips—but before he let himself get swept away by memories of his kisses, he shook his head fiercely to disperse the thoughts. He felt a familiar heat threatening to rise from inside himself, but he forced himself to ignore it and instead dove into preparing Hiyori’s pudding.

“...*Tsk*,” Yokozawa tutted in irritation at the umpteenth typo he’d made that day. The state he’d been in since the beginning of the week was starting to affect his work now, but despite understanding this, he’d found great difficulty in changing his attitude.

He knew fully well why he was feeling this way; he didn’t want to admit it...but it was all because he hadn’t gotten to spend any time alone with Kirishima in the past week. On top of their mutually hectic schedules, Kirishima had been spirited away out of town for some anime/manga-related event over the weekend, and then Yokozawa had been called to attend an autograph event on the following Monday’s holiday, leaving the pair just passing each other on their days off. Add to that the fact that he hadn’t gotten to see much of Hiyori or Sorata either, and he just simply hadn’t had time to sit down and relax.

He’d thought they might perhaps at *least* be able to have lunch together, sending off a text message that morning suggesting as such, but apparently today marked the end of the cycle, and Kirishima had responded that he couldn’t spare the time to leave the office.

“Yokozawa-san—do you have a moment?”
Henmi called out, interrupting his sighing to himself, and after closing the window displaying the proposal that just wasn’t going anywhere right now, he slipped back into ‘work superior’ mode.

“What is it?”

“The sample promotional materials for the next campaign came in; they actually look quite nice!”

“Yeah; these are bound to stand out in stores.”

“Indeed! Then—I’ll take these up to the editing floor!”

“Thanks. Ah—wait, no. I’ve got an errand I need to run up there, so I’ll just take care of the delivery while I’m at it.”

“Huh? Are you sure?” Henmi squawked in surprise at Yokozawa’s offer. He could hardly be blamed; Yokozawa generally had Henmi run errands to the editing departments to avoid accidentally running into Kirishima around the office, after all.

“I need to discuss something with them—and they helped us out before by asking one of

their mangaka to draft an illustration for the campaign, so I'd better give my thanks, too." Having an excuse like this would keep unnecessary questions from popping up when he dropped in to check things out.

"Understood. Oh—then when you get back, would you mind looking over my project proposal?"

"Sure. It shouldn't take long, so I'll be back soon." He snatched up the envelope with the promotional materials and left the sales floor, stepping onto the elevator and heading up to the fifth floor—the *Japun* editing division. He peeked into their area from the hallway, judging the condition as best he could.

"....."

The place was more sluggish and stagnant than he'd imagined, an oppressive atmosphere permeating everything in sight, and he froze in place before stepping one toe into the area. Kirishima had been muttering about how things were going particularly roughly this cycle, and he now recalled that the guy had seemed more frustrated than usual. Kirishima hardly ever wore a sour expression around the office, but he'd been decidedly tense today—perhaps because of

the general atmosphere of the editing department being in the sad state it was.

All of the editors seemed to be on death's doorstep, leaving Yokozawa to rethink his decision to visit and consider dropping by some other time. Just as he'd turned on his heel to head back down to the sales department, though, Kirishima's head shot up—

“!!”

—and their eyes locked, setting an expression of agitation on Yokozawa's features. He grit his teeth in frustration as he realized he'd just handed Kirishima a golden opportunity for teasing. He'd been relatively adept at maintaining a poker face around the office lately, but unexpected blows like this still did him in.

Kirishima shot to his feet, approaching in a ghastly state—but when Yokozawa took a hesitant step back at the intensity of his attention, Kirishima grabbed his arm and ruined any plan of escape. “Perfect timing, Yokozawa.”

“Wha...t?” He blinked several times in succession at the statement, struggling to wrap his head around the words.

Ignoring the altogether confused Yokozawa for a moment, Kirishima offhandedly called out to the nearby Katou, "I'm stepping out for a moment," and the pair departed the editing floor.

With his arm still tight in Kirishima's grip, Yokozawa found himself dragged out into the hallway, still unsure as to what the guy had meant by *perfect timing*. If there was something he'd needed Yokozawa to check, then why leave the editing department? Even if it were something more akin to a 'discussion', all they needed to do was head to the meeting space available on every floor. "What's the big idea?"

"Just shut up and follow me." He maintained his grip on Yokozawa's arm, heading down the hall, and his long legs quickly had them sprinting up a staircase.

Yokozawa's legs nearly buckled underneath him at being jerked along at such an awkward angle, but he shortly found himself being shuttled into an empty meeting room. "Geez, what the hell are you doing-?!" Kirishima ignored his question, instead silently locking the door behind them before turning a dark expression on Yokozawa. "Ki...Kirishima...-san...?" The grave expression suggested they'd fucked up

something yet again, and Yokozawa's chest clenched at the possibility of what lay ahead. "Was there another issue with—" he started, but his words were quickly stopped with a kiss as his lips were devoured greedily without even the grace of a breath granted.

Yokozawa's mind went blank at the unexpected action, and when he finally snapped back to his senses after a few beats, he found a tight grip around his hips. "Nn...hnm—!" He thumped his fist along Kirishima's back in protest, but the kiss only deepened in response. A tongue slipped through his lips to make a sweep of his mouth, and the slick sounds of their kissing and their labored breathing quickly roused a heat within him whether he liked it or not. "Hnn...nn..."

He fiercely clamped down with the last bits of his good senses on the part of him that desperately wanted to give in to the moment—this was *an office meeting room*. With the door locked as it was, hardly anyone was likely to barge in—but there was *still* a slim possibility. More so, though, there was the fact that they were on the clock, and it was unforgivable for working adults to engage in this sort of act on company time.

However, while Yokozawa would've liked to have given Kirishima a piece of his mind on such matters—the lips he needed to do so were otherwise engaged at the moment. Just as he was considering biting the guy's tongue to get him to let go, though, Kirishima finally released him from the kiss, perhaps sensing himself in some mortal danger.

“*You...!*”

“You have no idea how fucking glad I am to see you. I was seriously going out of my mind, I was so damn horny,” Kirishima cut in, his words lacking any grace and stalling Yokozawa in his gasping, wheezing attempt to chew him out.

“...*Huh?*”

“I never thought I'd get blue-balled for three whole weeks. It's been *torture*.”

“*What the—*you're not trying to tell me *this* is all you dragged me in here for, are you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“*Where the hell do you think we are?*”

“A meeting room at work. And I made sure to choose one with thick walls, so don’t you fret.”

“Then practice a little self-restraint since you seem to understand where this is!”
Maybe a few screws had come loose from the guy’s head in the wake of the destruction wrought by the end of the cycle.

“No can do—if I don’t get a little pick-me-up right this instant, there’s no way I’m gonna make it through tonight.” He slipped a finger into the knot holding Yokozawa’s necktie in place, tugging it down insistently, and before Yokozawa even realized it, the guy had gotten two of his shirt buttons unsnapped and laid his teeth along the strip of bared neck. “Ngh—don’t...*bite there*, dammit!”

“It’s fine; no one’ll notice so long as you keep your tie tight.”

“That’s *not* the issue—” He shuffled backwards in retreat, legs eventually bumping against the edge of a desk, and with nowhere left to run, he started to settle his weight on top of the desk.

Kirishima hadn’t once stopped his roaming hands while quibbling with Yokozawa, who

still couldn't divine just how serious or not the guy was being, and continued to nip at Yokozawa's nape. The sensation of Kirishima's fingers sliding along his spine seeped down through the layers of his suit, and the hands soon dipped down to his hips, slipping under the light suit jacket he wore and brushing against the muscles of his lower back. "Cut...it...ngh..."



Using a knee to force Yokozawa's legs apart, Kirishima turned his attentions to his groin now, using his free hand to pinch at a nipple, twisting it cloth and all. Yokozawa's brows drew together at the faint pain—his breathing was growing labored now, and conscious thought was starting to fade away. He tried to avert his attention from the actions being wrought upon his body, but it was futile.

"I said...cut it...ngh, *out!*" Summoning the last of his strength, he shoved Kirishima away with all the might he could muster—if this went on for even a moment more, there would be no turning back. He could already sense a buzzing throbbing deep within his core, and his groin was begging for more attention. "Just...so we're clear, I'll ask once more: You *do* realize we're at work and are *on the clock* right now, right?" He made sure to phrase his question clearly, as if reprimanding a child—but Kirishima only responded with a roll of his eyes and a forced sigh.

"God, you really are *way* too stiff sometimes."

"No, it's just your *brain* that's too soft!" he snapped, correcting the obviously peeved Kirishima. He needed the guy to understand

just who was the one behaving ridiculously here.

“I didn’t have time for lunch today, so what’s the harm in taking a break for a few?”

“You haven’t eaten anything all day?”

“Well—one of the girls from the department next to us gave me a chocolate bar.”

“You *really* need something more nutritious than...” Sure, it might do in a pinch for an emergency supply of energy, but there was no way a grown man could make it through the day on a single little chocolate bar for lunch. But busy as he may have been, it still didn’t excuse such misconduct in the office.

“Weeeell, if a certain *lovely wife* would make me a bentou now and then, maybe I could have a delicious, nutritional lunch...” He capped this wish with an innocent glance about the empty room.

“...Oi, are you trying to tell *me* to make you a boxed lunch?”

“Ooh, you caught on! I knew you’d get it!”

“I never said I’d make *shit*,” Yokozawa warned Kirishima, who stood there nodding

to himself in satisfaction; he couldn't stand having a casual remark mistaken as an offer like that. "Why the hell should I, anyways? I have to be up before you already—you trying to tell me you want me to get up even *earlier* now?"

In the face of Yokozawa's irritation, Kirishima returned, gravely somber, "Why don't we wake up together, then? I'm totally game for helping out if you just point me in the right direction. Ah—wait, waking up early tomorrow might be a bit tough..."

Yokozawa sighed to himself as Kirishima stood there making plans all on his own and pointed out something which had obviously slipped the man's mind: "You didn't even read the text I sent you this morning properly, did you? I can't go to your place tonight anyway. I told you in the message that I have a business reception this evening."

"What's more important to you, then? Work—or me?"

Yokozawa's irritation flared at the childish playful response; he couldn't put up with these suggestive jokes right now. "You really want to bring that up right now?"

When you'll probably be stuck here until morning finishing up your cycle?"

"Work and family *and* my lover are *all* important to me—plus, it'll make the overtime easier to get through knowing you're waiting for me at home."

"Yeah, right." It was useless trying to keep up with this guy, and while Yokozawa cast a frosty glance his way, it seemed to have no effect on Kirishima, who immediately changed tack and tried a different approach, face brightening.

"Ah—then how about tomorrow? You'll be there tomorrow for sure, right?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Who's forgetful now? Hiyo's going off on her little outdoor school adventure starting tomorrow."

"Oh yeah..." Now he remembered—tomorrow Hiyori would be gone for three days and two nights on school camping trip. She'd completely recovered from her cold two weeks prior, and Yokozawa now recalled that she'd sent him a text about it that morning. He'd gotten a bit carried away and made a huge portion of

the pudding she'd asked back then, but she'd eaten almost the entire thing by herself. When she'd finished, she'd worriedly pondered, "I wonder if I'm gonna get fat...", but given her build, she could probably stand to put a little more weight on her bones. Plus, Yokozawa had always thought girls looked cuter if they had a bit of roundness to them.

"It'll be the first time we've had some time alone in a while..."

"...So what?"

"So we can be as lovey-dovey as we want."

"Idiot!" It was hardly language befitting a man his age.

"What, you don't wanna be lovey-dovey with me?"

"Are you seriously asking me that with a straight face?" Was he just imagining the headache he felt forming from this exchange? His reflexes just couldn't last going all out against this guy. There really *had* to be something going on with Kirishima today—and maybe it spoke to just how much pressure he was under with work right now.

“Hey, I find it *quite* important to ascertain these sorts of things. I wouldn’t want to do something you objected to, after all.”

“Yeah *right*—says the man who gets off on teasing the shit out of me.”

“It’s your fault for looking so damn cute when you’re pissed.”

“Don’t try and push the blame onto me!”

“Ooh, I *love it* when you make that face.”

“.....!” Yokozawa’s face exploded into a flush at the words whispered right next to his ear. Try as he might, he was always doomed to failure in situations like this. He’d do his best to cleverly maneuver through Kirishima’s childish pranks—but he always found himself ultimately beaten down by the man’s mature coolness.

“I was *crazy* lonely without you last week...”

“.....”

“You were too, weren’t you, *Takafumi*?”

Sometimes silence was consent—and just as Yokozawa braced himself, ready this time to accept Kirishima as his face drew close

again...the sound of a cellphone ringing
wrent the air.

“*Dammit*—guess our time’s up. Yes?
Kirishima speaking.” He slipped back
seamlessly into work-mode, and over the
speaker, Yokozawa could hear a voice
frantically crying out *Kirishima-san, where
did you GO?!* From the sound of his speech
patterns, it was probably Katou.

“I was just about to head back. Give me
another minute, geez.” His air made him
seem like some cranky soba vendor making
excuses for his slow service, and when
Yokozawa mouthed silently *You liar*,
Kirishima reached over and pinched his
cheek as if ordering him to keep quiet.

“Cut that out!” he hissed angrily so as not to
be heard over the receiver, slapping at
Kirishima’s hands as he continued his
childish teasing. But Kirishima proceeded to
poke and prod wherever he could reach
despite Yokozawa’s clear indignation, all
the while continuing his phone conversation.
Despite continually having his hands batted
away, Kirishima never ceased his efforts,
obviously enjoying Yokozawa’s reactions.

“Ah—well I’ll leave that to you, then.
Yeah—that’s fine. I trust your judgment. All
right. I’ll be right there.”

“.....!” Yokozawa was nearly at his
limit, and he gripped a tight fist
around Kirishima’s wrist when the man
reached forward to get one last good cheek-
poke in. He squeezed with all his might, and
though Kirishima’s face showed his pain
clearly, he still seemed to be enjoying
himself.

“Gotcha. Get started with it for now.” He cut
the call and leered at Yokozawa, who still
kept his tight grip on Kirishima’s wrist. He
was running out of ways to react when the
guy just seemed to enjoy everything
Yokozawa threw at him. ”C’mon, it’s
nothing to get *that* pissed over.”

“I’m not *pissed*; I’m *shocked*. Now put the
phone away and get your ass back to the
editing floor!”

“Geez, you’re no fun. Try putting yourself
in my shoes and thinking about how hard it
is for me to leave you right now.”

“DON’T GROPE MY ASS.” He didn’t want
to deal with that kind of thing at home—but

he *certainly* didn't want to be subjected to such sexual harassment at the office either.

"All right, you win; we'll save the rest for tomorrow—but you'll need to take care of yourself on your own for now; this is tough for me, too."

"Don't play the victim!"

"Hahaha, all right, all right. I'm heading out then—oh, and don't worry. I won't lurk in the toilets on this floor, so feel free to *use them* if you need to."

"...Whatever, just...*get going!*" There'd be no recovering if he ran into anyone in his present state; he'd have to wait it out and hope he cooled off soon. But as he took a deep breath—he suddenly remembered.

"...Ah!"

He'd completely forgotten to thank Kirishima for his help with the campaign materials and neglected to get him to okay the new adverts.

Recalling how he'd gotten swept up in the moment, he couldn't bring himself to lay *all* the blame on Kirishima, but when he thought about having to drag himself back

up to the editing floor once again...he felt quite depressed.

Yokozawa ducked his head into a bow as he saw off the taxi carrying his client, and after ensuring the car had rounded a corner and was well out of sight, both he and Henmi finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good work today.”

“Whew! Today really did a number on me. I never expected him to drink so much...!”

“And here I was praying you wouldn’t lose your head with booze.” The client for today’s business meeting had been quite the alcohol connoisseur, and on top of easily drinking his way through several bottles of wine without batting a lash, the man had gone out of his way to encourage Yokozawa and Henmi to partake as well, forcing them both to drink a bit more than they could feasibly handle.

“I couldn’t let myself get tipsy tonight! But to tell the truth, I couldn’t even make heads or tails of the taste of the meal itself...”
Their client tonight had been the manager of the main branch of a large chain bookstore Marukawa would be doing business with for

the first time. Given that the man would be throwing his full support and cooperation behind the upcoming manga fair for *Japun*, Yokozawa had invited him out to dinner to express his gratitude as well as pound out details.

“What’re your plans now? Care for another drink?”

“Ah—no no no, I’m headed home now. If I drink any more tonight, things might get ugly.”

“That’s rare coming from you; feeling the summer fatigue already?” Henmi was usually the first to pipe up with a hearty “*Absolutely!*”, so he really must have been exhausted today. With all of the drinking parties last week and having to come in to the office for autograph events over the holidays, his fatigue must have been building up for quite some time.

“Perhaps—or maybe I’m just getting on up there in years!”

“Yeah, right. You’re still young; but I can’t have you wrecking your body, so enjoy your rest.” With that, the two parted ways; it was certainly no laughing matter considering

what might happen should Henmi be out of commission during such a busy period.

Yokozawa was just as exhausted himself, but he didn't feel like heading straight home just yet. "Guess one more drink won't hurt..." he muttered to himself, recalling that he was near a bar he'd frequented quite a bit in the past, and he headed for the establishment in question.

"Welcome!"

"One beer, please."

Perhaps he was loath to return to his apartment simply because he hated the fact that there was no one there waiting for him. Perhaps he would've been better off not being so damned stubborn and just agreeing to go on ahead to the Kirishimas' place. But then—given that Kirishima himself would be late coming home, there was a very good chance that his mother was spending the night looking after Hiyori, and while he was on friendly terms with the woman, having met her on several occasions, he couldn't bring himself to saunter into the apartment when the owner himself wasn't even home.

He settled at the counter, nursing the drink he'd ordered and checking his cell phone for

any texts that might have arrived recently—when he caught the sounds of two people arguing just behind him.

“You don’t care about me at all, do you?!”

“Just calm down—this isn’t the kind of place you can make a scene in.”

“You’re always so damn caught up in what other people think of you—I hate that! So you’re telling me you care more about what a bunch of strangers think than me?”

“That’s not it at all—I’m just saying, give a bit of thought as to where we are right now...”

Yokozawa casually glanced over his shoulder at what he took to be a lovers’ spat—when the woman doused him with the contents of a cup of water she’d thrown. She’d likely been aiming for the man sitting across from her, just behind Yokozawa, but he’d taken the brunt of the blow himself, and now the coat he’d had hanging across the back of his stool was soaked.

“You should just marry your job if you love it so much!” she spit out with finality, slinging the door open as she stormed out and leaving the entire bar in a spoiled mood.

“I—I’m so sorry for the inconvenience...” the man apologized awkwardly, whipping out a handkerchief as he began to pat down Yokozawa’s soaked jacket.

“Oh—no, it’s nothing. This’ll dry off soon enough, I’m sure. Please don’t worry about it.” When he glanced up, he felt a sense of familiarity from the man—as if he’d seen him somewhere before, and after picking through his memories, trying to place the face, he finally realized: “Ah!” This was Iokawa, the uncle of Hiyori’s classmate who’d brought her a birthday present recently.

Iokawa’s expression waxed confused at Yokozawa’s exclamation, but after a moment glancing at Yokozawa’s face, he reacted in much the same manner: “You’re...the man I met at Kirishima-san’s place, correct? If I recall, your name was...”

“Yokozawa,” he supplied before the man could struggle to remember.

“Right, right—Yokozawa-san! My apologies; I’m mortified you had to witness that...” He seemed even more embarrassed at what had just transpired now that he was faced with someone who knew him. Surely anyone would be in much the same state if an acquaintance had witnessed such a scene.

His interaction with Iokawa now was removed from the severity of his earlier tiff, leaving him much more agreeable now, but they could neither of them shake the heavy gazes of those around them. "Uh...would you like to head somewhere else? Your glass seems about empty, anyway." It was a hastily offered suggestion, but luckily enough, Yokozawa's own glass was nearing empty itself, and they'd likely have trouble enjoying a relaxing drink in this establishment now.

"Ah, y-yes, you have a point!" Iokawa seemed to have noticed the eyes of the other patrons on him at Yokozawa's suggestion, and with an apologetic duck of his head to the onlookers, he hastily gathered up his wallet. Perhaps in an effort to make it up to Yokozawa, Iokawa attempted to pay for their drinks together, but Yokozawa refused, clearing his own debt before the two stepped out of the bar.

"I really am sorry for getting you involved in my affairs, Yokozawa-san," he apologized again, bowing his head and leaving Yokozawa a bit uncomfortable at being apologized to so much over so insignificant a matter.

“Think nothing of it; I’d already been considering leaving soon, so it’s really not that big a deal.” He’d only intended to have one drink, so it had been a good excuse to head home.

“Would you...mind if I accompanied you as far as the station?”

“By all means.” He had no reason to refuse, after all, and it would’ve been awkward to purposefully split up when they were heading in the same direction. But the fact remained that Yokozawa had caught him in a rather embarrassing private scene, so he wasn’t quite sure where to go with the conversation.

“So...do you go to that bar often, Yokozawa-san?”

“Eh? Ah...well, I used to. I haven’t dropped by lately, though; tonight was the first time in a while, actually.”

“I see—then all the more reason for me to apologize for spoiling a moment you’d surely been enjoying.”

“No no no, really please—don’t fret over it.”

“If I’d know things would erupt like that...I would’ve chosen a different shop...” he allowed with a wry smile, muttering to himself that he’d never be able to show himself in that bar again. Yokozawa could think of nothing to say to console the man, so he instead fell silent. “...I’m sorry, for saying such strange things. I do believe I may be a bit drunk. I’m sure you’re feeling rather put-out listening to me go on like this.”

“Oh, no—that’s not... I mean, I can lend an ear if you need it?” Sometimes it helped talking things out with someone completely removed from the situation, and while Yokozawa would have balked if genuinely begged to offer advice, it was always better to give voice to these feelings rather than keeping them bottled up inside.

“I thought...well, that she might react more calmly if we were in a public place. Guess that backfired, huh? We’d been dating since our school days, but we’ve kind of drifted apart since graduating. Then, when I got really busy with work and couldn’t make time for her...she cheated on me.”

“Wha...?” If that was the case, then *she* should’ve been the one being attacked tonight; Yokozawa couldn’t wrap his mind

around the logic that had her so mercilessly chewing out Iokawa instead.

“She said that it was my fault for pouring myself into my job and making her lonely; which, well...we haven’t gotten to see much of each other at all over the past few months, so...”

“But still—isn’t that kind of ridiculous? Even if you were in the wrong for making her feel lonely, it’s hardly grounds to *cheat* on you.” Yokozawa knew full well the loneliness that came with not being able to find time to be with your lover; however, that hole in the heart was not one that could be filled by spending time instead with someone else. If she’d been able to satisfy her needs via adultery, then there had to have been issue with her feelings for her boyfriend to begin with.

“...You’re a really good person, Yokozawa-san.”

“Huh?”

“Well, this is only our second time ever speaking, and yet you’re being so patient in listening to my problems. Only truly kind folks can do that sort of thing. Most would

sooner run away than lend an ear to a guy who just got dumped.”

“I...suppose so.” He couldn’t help agreeing, as if they were discussing someone else. Sure, it was human nature to want to avoid getting drawn into annoying situations, but he’d never really given it that much thought until Iokawa pointed it out.

“Hahaha—I see you didn’t even realize it yourself. But still—thank you very much. Thanks to you, I think I’ll be able to get back on my feet after this.”

“Oh, no, not at all. I said I’d just listen to your woes, and then I opened my big mouth.”

“No—I’m truly grateful. I’m sure I’ll be able to pour myself full-force into my work tomorrow now. I’m afraid my job will have to be my lover for the foreseeable future,” Iokawa announced indifferently, and while he probably hadn’t completely recovered from the evening, it was good that he didn’t seem too shaken. The smile he wore may have been forced, but even so, time would heal all wounds.

Uneasy about continuing a discussion of loves lost, Yokozawa groped for some other

point of conversation they might share, recalling the day they'd first met. "That reminds me, why were you the one to drop by the apartment the other day, Iokawa-san?"

"The other day? Ah, Hiyori-chan's birthday, you mean? Yeah—I suppose it seemed a bit strange for an uncle to go along with his nephew rather than the parents."

"I wouldn't necessarily say *strange*, but I did wonder."

"Well, I live in the same apartment complex, for one, but I think he was mostly shy about talking to his parents about a girl he liked—he'll be hitting puberty soon, after all—so I offered to hear him out. He's an only child, too, so I'm something like an older brother for him."

Yokozawa could kind of understand how the kid must have been feeling; having his parents completely and enthusiastically support his efforts would likely only prove embarrassing, but it would be unbearable to be teased for it, too. As such, he might find himself wanting to place his trust in an uncle somewhat removed from the situation.

“He was planning on going alone originally—but got cold feet at the last minute, so I wound up accompanying him.”

“I see... So that’s how it was.” It had been glaringly obvious how nervous the poor kid had been, though Hiyori hadn’t seemed aware in the least of his crush. The girl could prove amazingly mature on occasion—but when it came to matters of romance, she was still very much a child. Granted, Yokozawa wasn’t sure he could handle her growing up *too* quickly, so unfortunately for Iokawa-kun, he hoped she stayed just the way she was.

“By the way, Yokozawa-san—are you by any chance employed at Marukawa Shoten...?”

“I am—but how did you...?”

“Oh, no, just—I heard from my nephew that Kirishima-san is the editor-in-chief of *Japun*, and you introduced yourself as his subordinate when we met the other day, so I wondered if you weren’t perhaps an editor maybe...?”

He could see the logic in Iokawa’s train of thought; Kirishima wasn’t the type to go about announcing his line of work, but it was hardly strange for parents and guardians

to know some level of personal information about others.

“Well, no—actually, I’m not his subordinate, per se. I work in sales,” he corrected. While such information might invite curiosity as to why two people so removed in age were as close as he and Kirishima seemed in their time off, he couldn’t bring himself to keep up the lie.

“Oh, really? I’m actually a salesman for a publishing house myself! Though we’re nowhere near as grand as Marukawa-san, of course.”

“Are you? May I ask who you work with, then?” It was rare that Yokozawa found opportunity to converse with someone else in his line of work, and sheer curiosity pressed the question.

“Fujino Books.”

“I see—so you’re in sales for Fujino Books, then? I’m a mystery fan myself, so I’ve read quite a few Fujino pieces.”

Fujino Books was a mid-ranked veteran publishing house, vending not only science fiction, mysteries, and foreign literature but also housing a rather impressive library of

picture books and children's literature as well. Hiyori's own bookshelves were stacked with more than a few Fujino titles.

"Wow, I'm thrilled! Ah—but of course, I read Marukawa-san's pieces, too! Usami-sensei's recent new release really was a novel idea; I quite enjoyed it!"

"Then thanks very much for your patronage; though I'm afraid I'm not in charge of the literature department myself."

"What genre do you deal with, then? Ah—seeing how close you are with Kirishima-san, I suspect it would be...manga?"

"Indeed. I deal with all manner of comics."

"I'm afraid I don't read too much manga, but I've got all the volumes of *Za Kan*. I can never figure out where the story's going to go, so I'm bowled over every time. I even broke out into tears with one of the recent chapters!" Iokawa may have seemed quiet on the surface, but it seemed he had quite the talkative side to him as well. From the looks of things, the guy would probably flip if he found out that Kirishima was Ijuuin Kyou's managing editor.

“Oh—I realize it’s a bit late for this sort of thing, but could I give you my card?”

“Sure, thank you—I’ll give you mine as well, if that’s all right?” Yokozawa never would’ve thought he’d find himself in a position exchanging business cards on a city street in the middle of the night.

“I’m thrilled to have gotten to meet someone like yourself, Yokozawa-san. I hope we can grab a drink together some time...? I’ve always wanted to chat with salesmen from other firms.” His words were likely little more than social niceties, but receiving such praise definitely didn’t leave Yokozawa with a bad feeling. Most people tended to avoid him altogether, and he was often mistaken for being in a bad mood if he didn’t say anything to dispel the misconception. The fact that Iokawa was treating him so nicely on only the second occasion of their meeting was likely due partly to the alcohol—but also due to Yokozawa’s relationship with Kirishima as well. Such connections tended to make people open up more.

“Yes, let’s.” And pulled along by Iokawa’s own smile, Yokozawa’s expression relaxed.

Yokozawa began ticking off items on his internal checklist; he'd finished prepping most of the materials he would need for the following week's print-run decision meeting, and the lineup for the upcoming fair was ready to be discussed as well. All that was left was to give everything a thorough re-check and hand it off to his boss for confirmation.

He hadn't had any rounds to make today, so the day had wound up being used for nothing but materials prep. Truthfully, he wasn't all that fond of desk work, but he couldn't exactly avoid it, and after ensuring that he'd put in his necessary hours on the task, he started to tidy up his desk area.

Kirishima had a meeting with an author in the afternoon, apparently, so he'd informed Yokozawa earlier that morning that he'd just head straight home from there once he'd finished. Middle of the week though it may have been, Yokozawa was heading over to Kirishima's place this evening—since Hiyori would be off on her three-day-two-night school camping trip.

In other words, they were *finally* going to get their long-awaited time alone together.

Yokozawa hadn't been able to relax since that morning—not because he had his head in the clouds like Kirishima, rest assured, but rather because he was just plain *nervous*. It would hardly be the first time they'd been alone in that apartment, and yet having the fact that they'd finally be alone for the first time in ages underscored so severely set him on edge.

As Yokozawa stood, glancing about to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything, his subordinate Henmi turned to him with surprise. "Oh—you're heading home already, Yokozawa-san?"

"Got a problem with it?"

"No—not at all; I simply thought it rare for you to head home at quitting time on a Wednesday... Ooh, do you perhaps have a *date*?"

"Idiot—hardly. I'm going home because *I'm done with work*. That's all." Flinching would only pique Henmi's curiosity all the more, and seeing as this was most assuredly *not* a "date", he wasn't lying.

"Then...that means you don't have a girlfriend right now?"

His brows furrowed at the unexpected point Henmi chose to zero in on. “Why the hell would you bring that up all of a sudden?”

Henmi explained himself, “Weeeell, I was kind of...asked to find out, see. Whether or not you’re seeing anyone. You’ve gotten pretty popular lately, you know, Yokozawa-san!”

“Who the hell’s asking that kind of thing?” he turned back on Henmi, easily sidestepping the teasing—but Henmi refused to respond.

“I can’t possibly reveal that, on grounds of privacy!”

“Then I’m not telling *you* shit either.” If the person inquiring had their right to privacy—then so did Yokozawa.

“Eeeh?? But I promised to find out without really thinking it through—please tell me!”

“Who *admits* to that kind of idiocy?”

“So—can I just go ahead and tell them you’re *not* seeing anyone?”

At this irresponsible suggestion, Yokozawa deemed it best not to continue the line of conversation with Henmi any further. “Say

whatever you like; I'm heading out. Good work today."

"Wai-Yokozawa-san!!"

Breathing a sigh of relief at having somehow managed to escape Henmi's interrogation, Yokozawa headed straight for the elevator—"...Hm?"—when his cell phone began buzzing in his pocket; it was a text from Kirishima, who was out of the office at the moment.

/Finished my meeting, so I'm heading on home./

If he was going straight back to the apartment from wherever he'd had the meeting, he'd almost certainly get there before Yokozawa. He punched out a message that he was leaving the office as well and slipped the phone back into his pocket just as the elevator doors opened.

"Ah, good work today, Yokozawa-san," called out the elevator's occupant—Hatori. Given the envelope he held in his hand, it was clear *he* at least was not heading home just yet.

"Same to you. Burning the midnight oil again tonight?"

“Indeed; are you off now, Yokozawa-san?
Quite early for you.”

“Mm, well...yeah.” He and Hatori were two birds of a feather with regard to their workaholic ways, so neither were often seen leaving work on time. They were both capable sorts, able to do pretty much anything once they put their minds to it, and received a sense of worth from a job-well-done. As such, the time often got away from them while seated at their desks. Kirishima, in turn, always left the office as soon as was humanly possible after finishing his work for the day and hardly ever brought work home—partly for Hiyori’s sake, but also because he didn’t like his career eating into his personal life.

“...Did something nice happen?”

“Wh—what do you mean ‘something’? Why would you ask that?” he shot back.

“Oh—no, just a feeling I got.” First Henmi had pestered him about a ‘date’, and now this? Was it *that* obvious from his expression...? Maybe he ought to check himself over in the mirror...

“Nothing really. Though new release sales are going pretty well this month.”

“Indeed; it sounds like the recent three-day weekend gave us quite a boost. That reminds me—I wanted to thank you for your advice on that matter the other day.”

“Oh—no, I should be thanking you. So...how’s Yoshikawa-sensei doing these days? Her recent new release got some pretty rave reviews, and I hear her serialized piece is doing pretty good.” He glanced at the advertisement papering the walls of the elevator.

“Thanks to you, quite well. Though she’s lagging behind in her schedule, as usual...” Hatori’s expression went deadpan, and he stared off into space; it seemed he had his hands full with Yoshikawa Chiharu, and Yokozawa had just brought up a touchy subject.

He groped for words, hoping to lighten the mood. “Well—that just shows how in-demand she is, right? Sounds like she’s really doing her best, that Yoshikawa-sensei. It’s a blessing for us in sales, too, that she’s always so eager to help out with our campaigns. Maybe...you don’t have to be so rough on her?”

“Out of the question; if I give her an inch, she’ll take a mile, and if I can’t get her to do

what she needs to *when* she needs to do it,
she'll never finish her manuscript.”



“I...I see...” He’d heard that Hatori and Yoshikawa were childhood friends, and from his attitude, Hatori struck Yokozawa as more of a *guardian* than a managing editor—perhaps it was that longstanding relationship that had him reacting that way. While a large part of the reason Yoshikawa-sensei always refused offers of autograph events was because she herself was on the shy side, Yokozawa suspected that Hatori didn’t want to show her off all that much either. If greeting the public ran the risk of exhausting her, Hatori had explained, he’d rather just have her focus on finishing her manuscripts on time.

His iron fist with his authors showed just how much importance he placed on their success; he was the type to fight back with all he had, heedless of any damage he might sustain himself, if ever there were anything that might prove unfavorable to his authors.

Back when *Emerald* had been struggling to get back on its feet, its editors had had to face more than their fair share of tough situations, but all of the difficulties they’d been through back then were the reason they were the division they were now.

“If there’s ever anything we can help with again, please feel free to let me know.

Yoshikawa's more than happy to do whatever she can to be of assistance."

"I'm glad to hear it. I'll do my best to sell the shit out of her next book."

"I'll be counting on it."

"All right, I'm off. Good work today." They parted ways on reaching the ground floor, and after passing the reception desk, Yokozawa exited the office building. The summer heat was still brutal, but once they'd reached mid-September, the evenings at least had become rather pleasant. The sun hadn't quite set by this hour, but the breeze brushing over his cheeks was welcome relief, and with a slight spring to his step, Yokozawa headed down the hill.

Yokozawa couldn't help feeling some sort of inability to relax as he walked the familiar road—one he usually traversed while carrying treats for Hiyori—empty-handed, and in no time at all, he'd reached his destination. He'd fired off a text message just in case asking Kirishima if he needed to pick up anything, but all he'd received in response was a terse, */No, just hurry up and get your ass home./*

Punching in the passcode he'd been given, he opened the auto lock at the entrance and headed for the elevators. "...I wonder what he intends to do about dinner, then..." he pondered to himself, just now realizing he was quite famished. He'd been so concerned with the fact that they'd be alone together this evening that thoughts of eating hadn't even passed through his mind. But given that he hadn't been instructed to pick up anything—maybe Kirishima was making something himself?

He pressed the intercom button, still as yet unable to bring himself to use the spare key he'd been entrusted with, and was immediately greeted by the sound of the bolt being unlatched as the door was shoved open from the inside.

"Welcome home."

"...I'm back." He found it a bit awkward saying this sort of thing after all this time; why was it he had no issues with the greeting when it came to Hiyori and yet couldn't help being overly conscious of everything when faced with Kirishima?

"So—want some dinner? Or a bath? Or perhaps...me?"

“.....”

Any discomfort or nerves that had been plaguing Yokozawa about the evening...were completely and utterly dispelled by the purposefully disgustingly cheesy comment.

“....What? Geez, say something, would you?”

“...Well, I’m pretty hungry—so I guess it’s dinner, then.” Any over-the-top reaction would only encourage Kirishima, after all. He’d always assumed that the guy resorted to these types of comments in an effort to rile up Yokozawa, but then again, maybe he just had an affinity for really corny jokes.

“Yeah right—you *obviously* mean me, right?”

“Huh?” At this, Kirishima locked the door to the foyer behind Yokozawa, giving his back a soft shove before he could even toe off his shoes.

“C’mon, snap it up.”

“*Hey*—what’re you doing?” He frantically tried to kick off his shoes, knowing he shouldn’t wear them inside the house, but his bag and jacket were quickly snatched

away from him as he was herded toward Kirishima's bedroom. "The hell kind of a joke is..."

"Who's joking?"

"Uwah—!" At the nonchalant response, a hand came up and gave Yokozawa a soft shove to the chest, robbing him of his balance and sending him toppling backward onto the bed. Before he could right himself, though, Kirishima slid onto the mattress and over Yokozawa's body, straddling him in victory. "W—wait, just hold on a second—"

He knew the guy had been in strange spirits since the previous day, but he hadn't seriously expected him to have Yokozawa on his back in bed within mere moments of stepping through the door.

"Just give up, would you? You're not gonna tell me you didn't see this coming, right?" He quickly tugged loose the necktie and then proceeded to unbutton Yokozawa's dress-shirt; Yokozawa was baffled as to how the guy couldn't manage to peel an apple and yet demonstrated surprising finesse with tasks such as this.

"I told you I was hungry!"

“Yeah, and I’m *starving* for you. So without further ado...”

“Oww—don’t *bite me*, dammit!” he snapped as Kirishima grazed his teeth over the neck bared for his appraisal, but Kirishima simply laughed merrily in response.

“You say that like you *don’t like it*—which we know is utter shit. Besides, a little pain’s kind of a turn-on, isn’t it?”

“Enough with the filthy commentary.” He could very much do without Kirishima making him sound like some sick pervert.

“Hey—don’t look at me; I’m happy admitting I like it when you do it to me.”

“When the hell have I ever *bitten* you?”

“You’ve never bitten—but I *have* felt your nails. You wouldn’t believe the work I have to go through to keep Hiyo from seeing the marks.”

“That...I never meant to...” It wasn’t as if he’d been consciously clawing at Kirishima; it was simply that, in the face of so much overwhelming sensation, he’d been known to cling to Kirishima’s back. Claw marks were merely a byproduct of such pleasure.

“Then I don’t mean to do it either—it’s just when I’ve got you here in my arms, I can’t help myself.”

“Nn...hng...!” His subsequent kiss turned into a rough nip as well, his tongue darting between Yokozawa’s teeth and sweeping about his mouth. Yokozawa’s brows drew into a furrow as their tongues slid together. The paralysis freezing his mind reverberated down his spine, headed for his very center, with Kirishima’s fingers following down along in its wake.

Stroking Yokozawa’s hip, his fingers slipped down his thighs and eased into the space between, stroking his inner thigh and drawing out a sharp, slight jerk of his body. “At least...let me change...” At this rate, his slacks were going to wrinkle—and he just couldn’t stand on some level getting carried away so easily like this. He hardly objected to the act itself—he simply didn’t like being so one-sidedly teased this way.

But Kirishima was having none of it. “No way; stripping you of that suit’s part of the fun.”

“*Wha...*” Before he’d even realized it, all the buttons on his shirt had been undone, and

Kirishima whipped off his belt, going straight for the fastener now.

With one hand trying valiantly to keep his underwear from being jerked down along with his pants, Yokozawa fixed a glare on Kirishima. “Why the fuck am *I* the only one getting stripped here?”

“What—you wanna see me naked that badly? *Kinky~*”

“Just shut up and get your clothes off.” Blushing or getting flustered was just inviting Kirishima’s amusement, so Yokozawa did his utmost to maintain a calm mien.

“This is good enough, isn’t it?” Kirishima stripped off the t-shirt he’d been wearing and tossed it aside haphazardly, immediately yanking Yokozawa’s slacks and underwear off with his free hand in one movement. Suddenly stripped and laid bare without warning, Yokozawa let out a yelp. “C’mon—you’re young and virile; try showing a little more *enthusiasm*.”

“Wh—what’re you grabbing all of a sudden?!” Kirishima had his fingers now wrapped around Yokozawa’s still-limp cock, and Yokozawa swallowed thickly. Not

granting him the time to even consider protesting, Kirishima quickly began working the shaft, sending heat pooling into Yokozawa's center.

"There you go, that's the spirit..."

"Ngh...*hn*...." Kirishima's skillful fingering had little difficulty in exciting Yokozawa, and while he might have wanted, on some level, to tell the guy off, he felt any unnecessary opening of his mouth would instead leak out some embarrassing sound, so he instead grit his teeth and focused on riding out the sensations welling up between his hips—when Kirishima, without warning, curled himself up and—

"!!"

Yokozawa's hips jumped when Kirishima's tongue touched his tip, his hand still feverishly working the shaft as he lifted it to lave a long stripe from stem to stern on the underside. "Y'don't...have to...do th...ngh..."

"Except I *want to*. How many times do I have to remind you?"

"St...o...hnn!" Kirishima eagerly swiped his tongue around the bits he could fit in his

mouth, teasing Yokozawa's balls with his free hand and stabbing the slit with the tip of his tongue from time to time, setting Yokozawa's hips to trembling with tiny little jumps on each pass.

The warm, inviting wetness wrapped around him left Yokozawa feeling as if his hips were just going to melt away, and he thrust almost painfully into the embrace of Kirishima's mouth. "St...o-let...go, I'm..."

His mind was a roiling mess of shame and pleasure, and he buried his fingers in Kirishima's hair, trying to prise him away, but he couldn't muster any strength to do so, and the caresses Kirishima favored him with only grew all the more passionate. Loath to release any sort of embarrassing sound, he grit his teeth with all his might, but nevertheless, sounds he couldn't believe to be his own seeped from his throat. "Hnn...ahn..."

"Go on—just *come* already." With this, he took Yokozawa deep into his mouth and inhaled sharply.

".....Ahn...ngh!" Yokozawa's vision went white, and unable to clamp down on the urge, he climaxed as a great shudder rippled through his body. He was weak to fellatio in

large part because Kirishima drank down his release with such a cool, collected expression, and despite Yokozawa's continued demands not to do so, he never paid him heed.

Lifting his gaze, he swiped a finger along his slick lips in a gesture so graphic it forced Yokozawa to glance away.

"When am I gonna get you used to that, huh?" Kirishima prodded with a chuckle.

"*Shut up*," he returned, albeit without much bite, his body sluggish from his recent climax and robbing him of the strength to so much as glare at Kirishima. He allowed himself a few long moments to recover his breathing, sprawled out on his back—but this proved a mistake.

Unprepared as he was, Kirishima snatched off the slacks and underwear still tangled at his feet, even pulling off his socks as he went with quick, precise movements, leaving Yokozawa to catch up to what was happening a few seconds later. "Hey—wait a minute—!"

"Is that *all* you know how to say? Why not change up your lines now and then?"

“Wai—” But his words were cut off as lotion-coated fingers slipped down between his legs, and he swallowed thickly at the slick, cool sensation. Even as he was still working to mentally prepare himself for what was coming next, the fingers pushed inside.

“That *h*-ngh...”

“It doesn’t *hurt*—not with all this lotion, surely? Or is this your way of begging me to be more *gentle* with you?”

“*Fuck* no.” He tossed a glare at Kirishima, who smirked down at him, a bottle of lotion in one hand—but it didn’t last long. Just as Kirishima had boasted, it didn’t hurt—but it nevertheless felt *strange*. He grimaced at the fingers scissoring about inside of him, feeling not so much like a carp on the chopping block as like he was sitting in a dentist’s chair, waiting. “Hngh...”

The fingers brushed against him from inside as Kirishima worked him open, preparing this place which wasn’t meant to accept intrusion. He fought back the sighs that bubbled up as the fingers slid in and out, and when he unconsciously clenched his teeth tight, he clamped down on the fingers.

Kirishima brought his face near Yokozawa's whispering softly, words like a faint breath, "It's all right; just relax..."

"Nn..." He made every effort to distract himself from the fingers and their probing, but it simply wasn't working. "M...*fine*, just...go ahead..." Playing fine was simply a cover for his discomfort; he'd rather be ridden rough a thousand times over than coddled like this—at least that way, he could lose the lingering reason still clinging to his consciousness.

Kirishima slipped his fingers free and pressed Yokozawa's legs open, and his hip joints shortly mounted a protest at the backs of his knees being pressed forward and down, bending him practically in half. "Ow—dammit, they're not gonna open any wider!"

"Y'know, I've thought this before, but: you're *really* stiff."

"Shut up... This's hardly the time to bring that up."

"You can always just say 'I want you *now*' when you're trying to butter me up, you know."

“Wha—who the hell would—” But he didn’t get a chance to finish his rebuttal, breath catching in his throat as Kirishima pressed the tip of his cock, covered in a thin condom, inside, easing forward deeper and deeper and sending sparks flashing just before Yokozawa’s eyes.

“...Nnaah...ngh!” Kirishima braced his hands against Yokozawa’s hips, lifting them up with all he had.

No matter how many times he experienced it, the sensation of something hard pressing its way into Yokozawa’s body would never *not* feel strange—and knowing how it would lead to pleasure simply made the human body all the more fascinating in his eyes.

He didn’t dislike being able to share this experience with Kirishima in the least—but he couldn’t help the faint resistance that still welled up within him whenever he found himself pressed down, legs splayed wide. Maybe it was because he simply found the awkward, defenseless position utterly humiliating. He only allowed it because it was *Kirishima*—he wasn’t bottoming here because he *wanted* to, he didn’t *want* to be fucked like this. It was simply that he could find no reason to deny Kirishima as he so fervently sought Yokozawa this way.

Or maybe thinking up excuses like that in the middle of such an act was the only way he could find refuge from facing reality. He struggled not to lose himself in the urge to just die from shame, even as he was assaulted with pleasure—how much longer would it take before he was able to accept this as *normal*?

“Hngh...”

“Open your eyes. Look at me.”

“Don’t...tell me what to...do.”

“Look at me, *Takafumi*.”

“Sh...ut up...” He struggled to lift his lids, gulping down a haggard breath and locking eyes with Kirishima as he stared back—and in that instant, he couldn’t have torn his gaze away if he’d *wanted* to.



“There you go...”

“Don’t have to...sound so damn...cocky—ahngh!” His spine twisted up on a particularly deep thrust and his fingers buried themselves in the sheets with startling strength. The thrusts came more punishingly now, sealing off all protest and leaving Yokozawa feeling as if he’d just been drawn into a storm.

The thrusts began to push him further up on the bed, but the hands at his hips dug in, yanking him forward again as Kirishima sought deeper and deeper penetration, and with each pass, he found himself clamping down on the shaft piercing him.

“Aah—ah!” His voice broke, breath ragged. He’d long since lost track of how often he’d wished to be free, once back to himself, of any memories of what he did in the throes of passion. Unfortunately, though, the reality was that he could recall such moments as vividly as if reliving them in a dream.

“I keep...telling you...let me hear that voice of yours even *more*.”

“Haa...ah! *Nggah!*” Jolted and juddering as he was in the wake of the onslaught, Yokozawa found himself at last slipping his

arms around Kirishima's back, and clutching his shoulders as he did brought them into an embrace. The lips that pressed kisses to his temple and nape *burned* almost.

Kirishima softly whispered his name against his ear—and the impact sent him over the edge, the urges he'd been fighting finally bursting free and releasing his passion in a brilliant explosion. “———...!!”

Kirishima found his own release in nearly the same instant, peaking—and then collapsing atop Yokozawa in an inelegant heap as he released the breath he'd been holding, their labored breathing mingling between them both.

As the fever slowly seeped from his body, the reason that had all but abandoned him moments before gradually began to take shape again, filling Yokozawa with shame at their state.

“...Just, get the hell off me; you're *heavy*.”

“C'mon, it's not *that* bad.”

“I feel like I'm gonna get *crushed*. Getting a little porky, are we?”

“Hey—just what part of me is *porky*? If we’re gonna point out each other’s flaws, I could mention that you’re putting on a little extra weight right around *here*—”

“Don’t pinch me!” he snapped, slapping away the hand that had reached out to grab a bit of the flesh around Yokozawa’s waist. He was quite sure he hadn’t gained any weight, but he *was* a bit sensitive about losing definition.

“I know *just* what’s caused it, too: not enough exercise.”

“... You just wanted to say that; now get off.”

“Huh? Surely you must be joking—you don’t *seriously* think we’re done here, do you?”

“Wh—but, we both have work in the morning!” Surely *Kirishima* had to be the one joking, suggesting something like that with such a serious mien—it was the middle of the week, so he *really* needed Kirishima to do a bit of long-term consideration here.

“You’re young; have some balls. It’s too soon for you to wimp out on me now.”

“Don’t try to suggest this is just a matter of being *up to it* or not!”

“Then let’s discuss this leisurely—*later*. We’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

“There’s *nothing to discuss!*”

“Look on the bright side—it’ll be a great opportunity to get in that exercise you’ve been lacking.”

“.....!” But naturally, Yokozawa’s protests fell on deaf ears, and the night stretched on...

“Ugh, I’m starving...”

“Gee, I wonder whose fault *that* is.”

Yokozawa’s current state of utter exhaustion could be entirely chalked up to the fact that he’d been dragged straight into the bedroom on arriving home from work, not even granted the pleasure of an evening meal. He could hardly be blamed for the irritation that flared up when Kirishima complained about the empty state of his own stomach.

The guy had *far* too much energy for his age; he’d even been stuck at the office until well into the evening the previous night due

to the end of the cycle bearing down upon him. Why hadn't Yokozawa been able to stop him? He knew it was too little, too late, but he couldn't help going over things in his mind.

He vowed to himself to use this as a learning opportunity for the future, but he couldn't help but suspect he'd find himself being dragged along like this again eventually.

"...That reminds me, what'd you get for dinner?"

"Pork and cabbage."

"*Huh?*" Those were ingredients—not a proper *dish*. Was Yokozawa just imagining things, or was this not a good sign...?

"Well, I wanted ginger-fried pork."

"You're not trying to tell me *you* made it?" he hazarded—and the expression he received in return was shocked.

"Hell no. I'd slice off my fingers if I tried to chop cabbage, you know that. Oh—but I made sure to soak the rice and put it on to steam. *And* I learned my lesson after last time and got the thin-sliced pork. So—it should be fine."

“You say that like it’s something worth being *proud* of...” Kirishima’s excuses left him exhausted, sapping any and all will to drag himself from the bed. When he’d asked Kirishima to pick up groceries a few days prior, the guy had come back with a whole *block* of meat. He’d explained that he’d just assumed meat was meat and this was as good as any but had seemed genuinely hurt when Hiyori had expressed her disbelief at his purchase.

“The rice is probably done steaming now, though—c’mon, let’s go make dinner. I made sure to pull out that apron for you, too.”

“.....”

There was no way Yokozawa even *remotely* had the strength left in him to prepare a meal—which meant his only other option now was to sulk in bed, and he wordlessly shifted over on the mattress and placed his back to Kirishima.

“Oi—Yokozawa? Wait—are you tired? Hellooooo—?”

Maybe he assumed if he just kept calling, eventually Yokozawa would respond—but instead, Yokozawa just squeezed his eyes shut with all his might.

“Are the bentous finished? They look tasty.”

“I’ve got them chilling right now, so don’t go poking around trying to taste anything.”

“I haven’t touched them!”

“That’s why I said *don’t do it.*” Kirishima had peeked into the kitchen just as Yokozawa had placed the finishing touches on the lunch boxes he’d prepared, slapping away the hand that had reached forward before any damage could be done. The boxes featured ginger pork as the main dish—the very meal that Kirishima had requested the previous evening.

Exhausted in body and mind from being dragged into the bedroom the moment he’d set foot in the apartment the night before, he hadn’t been able to muster the strength to prepare any meals, and while he would have been happy to let his attempt at feigned sleep to throw off Kirishima turn into genuine slumber, his empty stomach had refused to allow him such freedom. But even after dragging himself out of bed, he still hadn’t had the energy to prepare anything of merit and had wound up satisfying his hunger with leftovers, leaving the unused pork to become their lunches for today.

Somewhere along the way, Kirishima had rummaged up two bentou boxes, reassuring Yokozawa that, “I made sure to find two different ones, so no one’ll be the wiser.” Yokozawa, however, would’ve rather he applied such discretion in *other* matters—but that was probably too tall an order.

“Not a finger on these, got it?” he reminded

“Yes sir~ I understand,” Kirishima allowed, and with that, Yokozawa headed back into the bedroom the change. Given that he did on occasion sleep over during the week, he’d made sure to leave a spare suit and dress shirt hanging up. After all, no salesman worth his salt could show up at work wearing the same thing as he had the day before. He tore off the protective plastic cover and slipped on the work shirt, followed by his slacks. He’d just begun work on a tie he’d picked at random, though, when Kirishima felt the need to offer commentary

“I wouldn’t wear that tie if I were you.”

“It’s the same tie I always wear with this suit.” Besides, he only kept three ties here, and neither of the other ties really went with what he had on.

“Change things up once in a while; how about this one?”

“...That’s *yours* though.” The tie Kirishima held out for him was a rather gaudy shade with a pattern Yokozawa never would have chosen for himself. It might suit Kirishima, but Yokozawa didn’t believe he could quite do the thing justice.

“And like I said—it’s fine. Besides, you’re supposed to wear something of your lover’s whenever you stay the night at their place.”

“Says who?”

“Just *trust me*. You’ll look great in it—here, I’ll even tie it for you; face the mirror.”

“...Have it your way.” The guy still seemed to be riding high from the previous evening. He slipped his arms underneath Yokozawa’s, forcing Yokozawa to lift his arms away from his body so as not to get in the way while Kirishima went about his business tying the tie.

“...It’s tough tying someone else’s tie...”

“Then I’ll do it myself, geez...”

“What the hell—it was just a comment. I’m almost done, so just pipe down and let me finish.”

“Yeah yeah...” He likely wasn’t used to fastening ties given that Kirishima himself hardly ever wore one. Yokozawa couldn’t help thinking that it would be quicker just to get it over with himself, unable to relax properly as he watched Kirishima go through the motions and closing his eyes to distract himself. The body heat seeping through his back, the weight of Kirishima’s head resting just at his shoulder, the presence of his fingers near his chest—they all worked in concert to keep Yokozawa alert and on edge. How were you supposed to describe this feeling of unease...?

“There—whadya think?” At Kirishima’s prompting, he opened his eyes again, staring into the mirror, and while loath to give Kirishima a bigger head than he already had, he had to admit he didn’t actually look half bad.

“...It’s fine, I guess.”

“C’mon, don’t be shy—you look great, I’m telling you.”

“Whatever—how long are you planning on hanging on me? If you’re done, get off me.” He reached down to peel away the arms Kirishima had placed on his waist by the fingers, finally releasing himself from the embrace. A weekday morning was hardly the time to get carried away. “You know—there’s no reason for you to come into the office with me. Why not relax a bit once in a while?” Unlike the sales division, editors worked flexible schedules, so given that Hiyori wouldn’t be back from her outing until tomorrow afternoon, Kirishima could afford to go in a little later than usual.

“What? You don’t want me going in with you, then?”

“I couldn’t care less; I’m not a *kid* who needs a chaperone though.”

“What an idiot—being a kid’s *fun*. What’s so bad about reliving your childhood?”

“You’re a hell of a lot more idiotic than I ever could be.” The guy had to be sprouting flowers in that head of his, but when he returned the comment, he was met instead with an amused laugh.

He stepped into the bathroom, running some of Kirishima’s product through his hair

before heading back into the kitchen, where he found the bentou boxes already out and sealed with lids.

“Ah—I wrapped up our bentous.”

“...Yeah, I can see that.” The ends of the kerchief holding each box had been tied into granny knots, which while not pretty, were passable. The guy must’ve *really* wanted to help out somehow. “All right, Sorata—we’re heading out. Take care of the place while we’re gone,” he called out to the cat, who sat atop his little tower erected in the living room, staring out the window. The piece had been an impulse buy by Kirishima when the three had visited a home furnishings store a short while before. Sorata had been more than a little wary of the tower initially, but now he seemed to have taken to it quite thoroughly.

“Hey, have you seen my watch, Yokozaawa?”

“Of course not—did you leave it in the bedroom? And snap it up—we’re gonna be late. I’m gonna take the trash down ahead of you.”

“Oi—wait a minute for me, would you?”

“I’ll wait—*downstairs*.”

“No—wait for me in the genkan!”

Yokozawa ignored the plea, snatching up the bag of burnable garbage and the bundle of magazines to be tossed out as he exited the apartment. The Kirishimas’ apartment complex allowed material to be placed in the garbage area on any day of the week, with Kirishima in charge of normal garbage and Hiyori in charge of separating out the recyclables.

Stepping onto the elevator, Yokozawa let out a sigh; Kirishima’s high spirits this morning had already gone a ways to exhausting him before the day even got started. If pressed to admit it—he was far from unhappy that they’d finally found some time alone together. It was simply that he didn’t know how to *respond* in the face of such energy. “...Geez...”

He tugged open the door to the garbage bin and set the bag and bundle in their respective locations—but just as he moved to close the door again, a voice called out to him from behind.

“Good morning.”

“Oh, good morning—Iokawa-san?” For when he turned around, there was Iokawa, whom he’d just encountered only two nights prior. It seemed he had come to toss his garbage as well, and Yokozawa stalled the door from closing, pressing a hand to keep it open.

“Ah, sorry—thanks very much.”

Running into the guy again like this suggested that coincidences tended to repeat themselves. “I see you must’ve spent the night at Kirishima-san’s place last night, then?”

“Oh—ah, yeah. Kind of had a little too much to drink, so...” Iokawa’s assumption, given Yokozawa’s appearance here at this hour of the morning, wasn’t far-fetched, and overreacting to every little comment would only arouse suspicion. If they were close enough that Kirishima invited Yokozawa into his home from time to time, then it stood to reason that having Yokozawa stay the night wasn’t too far a stretch. There was no reason for Iokawa to suspect anything untoward of their relationship at all.

“Is your hangover all right, then?”

“I don’t really tend to get hangovers that much. So, do you always head to work at

this hour, Iokawa-san?" he asked innocently, in an attempt to switch topics.

"I usually head out a bit later than this, actually, but I woke up early this morning for some reason. Except I seem to have forgotten something in my apartment and have to head back, so now the early start I got is about to go to waste." He chuckled at his own state, and Yokozawa was reminded, as he had been those few nights before, that the guy seemed a little ditzzy. "Oh—and I'm sure you don't really want to hear this, but...I talked to my girlfriend on the phone after the incident the other night, and we decided to formally break things off."

"...I see." Perhaps he'd thought Yokozawa deserved to hear how things had panned out after getting dragged into being involved. From his expression, at least, Iokawa seemed refreshed, relieved compared to two nights before.

Everyone dealt with love differently, and Yokozawa hardly had enough experience in the act to go about doling out advice to others, but he suspected Iokawa would find someone much more suitable in the future.

"I've been a bit preoccupied with this matter lately, but now I can put all my focus into

my work. I intend to go on a selling spree, just so you know—I'm not going to be losing to you, Yokozawa-san!"

As they headed back to the complex entrance, Iokawa's declaration in his ears, Kirishima stepped out of the elevator. "Dammit, Yokozawa—I *told* you to wai—ah, Iokawa-san?"

"Oh, Kirishima-san. Good morning."

"Good morning. Are you headed to work as well, Iokawa-san?" His inquiry reflected Yokozawa's own from earlier. This was probably the only kind of conversation one could easily hold with someone who only amounted to a casual acquaintance.

"No—I've forgotten something in my apartment, so I was just about to head back. And after I was doing so well in getting an early start too—I'm such a klutz! Oh—thanks so much for letting my nephew drop by the other day. He was absolutely thrilled to get a gift in return."

Iokawa's nephew had brought Hiyori a present for her birthday, and on being consulted by the girl as to what sort of gift in return a young boy might like, Kirishima and Yokozawa had both wracked their

brains to come up with something appropriate.

“That’s good to hear; sounds like it was the right choice in choosing something together with Hiyori. By the way—when did you and Yokozawa grow so close?”

A shudder ran up Yokozawa’s spine at the question; they’d only been *chatting*, certainly nothing suspicious.

“Oh, we ran into each other at a bar the night before last—he was sitting in a chair right behind my own.”

“Night before last?”

“Ah—it was after the business dinner I mentioned; we just happened to bump into one another.”

“I see—though it’s the first I’m hearing of it.” His eyes, though, accused *You never told me*.

I just didn’t have time to bring it up.” He hadn’t done anything untoward in the least—but bringing up the fact that he’d been present when Iokawa had been arguing with his girlfriend would violate Iokawa’s privacy.

“He kind of got dragged into some trouble of my own, and I’m afraid I greatly inconvenienced him. But after we chatted for a bit later, I was quite shocked to find out he’s a salesman like me!”

“Salesman?”

“Apparently Iokawa-san’s a salesman for Fujino Books.”

“Is that so? My daughter’s an avid reader of your children’s books.”

“Really? That’s great! I rarely have opportunity to get to know others in my line of business, so I just kind of got carried away with conversation when I found out Yokozawa-san was in sales as well.”

“Well now *that* I can’t miss out on—what’d you two talk about?” Kirishima had a smile plastered across his features, but his eyes weren’t laughing in the least, and Yokozawa got the distinct feeling that the guy was jumping to ridiculous conclusions—but any attempts to correct the misconception here would mean exposing their private lives to Iokawa.

“Just business,” Yokozawa reassured; Iokawa was simply making a bigger deal out

of their conversation than it had truly been—nothing special had passed between them. They'd discussed little more than common issues they met on the job, irritations they dealt with.

"Hmm...just business, huh?"

"I'd love to chat again if we ever have opportunity."

"Oh me too, by all means—I'm ever so curious as to what sort of things Yokozawa chatted about."

"And I told you it was *nothing special*." A cold sweat dripped down his back as he fought down panic that Kirishima might actually blurt out something about their relationship—he couldn't let the two converse any further, he determined, and quickly ended the exchange. "Oh—would you look at the time! We really need to get going—gonna be late for work!" he suggested, glancing pointedly to his watch.

"Yeah, you're right—shall we?"

"Oh—my apologies for keeping you!"

"Not at all; it was a pleasure seeing you again. Well then, we're off." Kirishima

offered Iokawa a short nod of his head before heading off.”

“Hey—wait up! Ah, I’m sorry, I must be going!” Yokozawa nodded to Iokawa as well before jogging to catch up to Kirishima, flustered. Drawing up beside the man and wracking his brain as to just how to explain himself, he noticed that Kirishima was in a decidedly bad mood now.

“...*You* were awfully friendly with him,” he noted peevishly, sparking Yokozawa’s irritation. He didn’t recall being particularly friendly to Iokawa, nor had he done anything he thought deserving of Kirishima’s ire.

“It was sheer coincidence when we met up before—which just led us to chat a bit—and this was coincidence as well. Most people would greet a casual acquaintance when they ran into them, right?”

“Seemed closer than ‘casual acquaintances’ to me.”

“We’re both in sales; of course we’re going to feel affinity for one another.”

“Maybe. But—it wouldn’t have killed you to have told me, at least.” Perhaps he was

simply irritated that something had happened and he hadn't known about it—and Yokozawa did feel a twinge of guilt for what amounted to keeping the meeting from Kirishima, but really, it was hardly anything worth such blame.

“And like I said—I just didn't have the chance to bring it up. You've been really busy lately...”

“You could've mentioned it *yesterday*.”

“And whose fault was it I didn't get a free moment to *do that*?” The previous evening had hardly been the time for conversation; Kirishima ought to have known that better than anyone else.

“It wouldn't have take more than five minutes to mention that you ran into him.”

“God you're annoying; it's none of your damn business who I associate with.”

“*None of my business?*”

“.....!” The error in his choice of words hit home—he shouldn't have used such language. Even if it *didn't* concern Kirishima, that wasn't the kind of thing you said to someone you were in a relationship

with. He knew full well that Kirishima's behavior was simply product of petty jealousy—but being harassed like that had just pushed Yokozawa over the edge. “I mean...just—it's nothing you need to worry about...is what I was trying...to say...”

“...I'm not worried. I'm just *irritated*.” Yokozawa, more than most others, could understand what jealousy could do to a person—but he hadn't done anything, never would, to betray Kirishima, and such over-the-top reactions in the face of casual banter were simply annoying.

Or was he really that untrustworthy?
“...Fine, then *be pissed* if you want,” he spit out, pulling the silent treatment on Kirishima for the rest of the commute.

It had been such a small thing—but now they were on completely different wavelengths.

Neither Yokozawa nor Kirishima spoke another word to one another for the remainder of the commute, silence stretching between them until they reached the office. Being as they were headed to the same location, they could hardly separate at any point along the way, and so the unbearably awkward commute commenced.

They'd just seen each other again during the meeting that had just finished, but they hadn't traded a single word during that time, and sparing a fleeting glance over at Kirishima, busy chatting with the other editors, Yokozawa stood in place, preparing to leave.

He knew situations like this were better resolved sooner rather than later, but he was loath to be the first to break, and besides—he hadn't found any moment to strike up a conversation even if he'd wanted to. He would just wait things out a bit longer, and as he released a soft sigh to himself, he twitched as a hand came down on his shoulder from behind, surprising him.

"A word, Yokozawa?"

"...Oh, it's you, Masamune."

"What's with you today? It's not like you to just space out like that."

"Am I? Maybe because I didn't get much sleep last night." Which wasn't a lie—he'd burned the midnight oil trying to keep up with Kirishima, who just hadn't seemed inclined to slow down any time soon.

"You feeling okay?"

“Yeah; if I can just make it through this week, I think things’ll be fine.”

“Well—don’t push yourself too hard. ...Hey, did your taste change?”

“What do you mean?” His brows furrowed at the comment, out of the blue as it was.

“No, just...your necktie; not really a pattern I’ve seen you wear before. You never used to wear stuff like this before, right?”

“...Oh, I just...had it lying around...” None of the other sales staff had mentioned it, so he’d completely forgotten that he was wearing Kirishima’s necktie today. He never would’ve expected Takano of all people to notice, and now he found himself rather flustered.

“Hey, what’re you getting worked up for?”

Trying to come up with an excuse would just seem all the more suspicious, and after a moment’s hesitation, he brushed it off with an innocuous, “...You think it looks weird?”

“...I guess it’s fine? Doesn’t look bad at all, actually.”

“O—oh, okay...” His lips unconsciously twitched up into a smile at the

compliment—but on realizing this, he quickly schooled his features again. They hadn't been fighting that morning when Kirishima had helped him into the tie.

He brought his fingers up, brushing them over the knot Kirishima had fastened.

Why...had they fought over something so seemingly insignificant...?

“Oh—sorry, got side-tracked. About the fair we've got coming up...” Yokozawa let himself slip back into work mode, turning his full attention to the discussion with Takano—but soon felt as if someone was watching him, and on flicking his gaze casually to the side, he found Kirishima staring at them, expression steely.

“.....!!”

“...Yokozawa? Are you listening to me?”

“Of course I am,” he snapped back, but he couldn't shake Kirishima's appearance from his mind. In all honesty, none of the feelings he'd held for Takano before lingered now, and while he still felt some embarrassment at how he'd acted before, all he felt for Takano was the simple affection of a friend.

Kirishima's reassurance that *you don't have to forget how you loved him* had allowed him to come to terms with his own feelings. If he'd been convinced he absolutely needed to forget, to move on, it would've likely only made the rejection hit all the harder, and he very likely might not have been able to recover.

What on earth was going on with Kirishima today...? Just when he'd thought the guy had been in high spirits, his mood had taken a sudden sharp dive—surely there was some limit to the term 'emotional instability'.

"So—I'll be counting on your help in that respect."

"Oh—yeah, sure. Leave it to me."

"...What's wrong?"

"It's—nothing." Without his realizing it, Kirishima had slipped out of the conference room. The usual Kirishima would've likely just sauntered over and deposited himself squarely in the middle of their conversation with *So what're you two talking about?*

"All right then; I'll drop you an e-mail when I've got the details."

“Sure, got it.” Takano took his leave here, and Yokozawa now realized he was the only person left in the empty conference room. The eerie quiet was rather bleak, and he quickly exited the room.

If he left things between himself and Kirishima the way they were, the situation would only worsen, he was starting to feel—and yet he still hadn’t the faintest clue how to go about resolving things. At the very least, he felt he wasn’t the one who ought to apologize. He wasn’t aware that he’d done anything wrong, after all, and while he did feel bad for hurting Kirishima’s feelings with his comments, the man’s reaction had been far too narrow-minded in the first place.

But what had driving Kirishima to get so irritated about Iokawa to begin with? He’d been strangely on-edge that first time they’d met as well.

“Ah, welcome back! I was planning on having ramen for lunch—how about you, Yokozawa-san?” Henmi called out to him, wallet in hand, when he returned to the sales floor.

“Oh—lunch time already? I’ll have my lunch here today.”

“Rare for you to have bought lunch to eat!”

“Uh, yeah...well.” It wasn’t so much *bought* as *prepared himself*, but there was no reason to go out of his way to announce this fact.

“That reminds me...when I dropped by the *Japun* editing division earlier, Kirishima-san was showing off his bentou! I wonder if his daughter made it for him. Man, that sure sounds nice...”

“...Yeah, I suppose so.” With no small measure of relief that Henmi didn’t seem to suspect that Yokozawa had prepared it, he opted against pulling out his own bentou where Henmi could see it.

“Maybe I’ll try fixing myself one sometime! Huh? Where are you going, Yokozawa-san?”

“None of your business.” He hastily rewrapped the bentou box and gathered his things, standing to leave in search of some place where he could eat in peace. Deciding he’d take care of his rounds after finishing his lunch, he slipped the necessary materials into his bag as well.

He first considered heading up to the roof—but he couldn’t discount the possibility

of someone from the office having the same idea, so he decided to head outside instead. There was a large shrine located only a short distance from the office; it would have benches and likely few visitors, given that it wasn't the season for flower-viewing. The sunlight was still quite brutal, but the heat at least was no longer oppressive. Sometimes it was nice to get out of the office for lunch.

He paused along the way to grab a drink from a vending machine before seeking out a sparsely populated corner of the temple grounds and settling in. Glancing around, he was surprised to find not only sight-seeing couples and parents walking with their children, but also the odd businessman or two taking a break. It was likely easier to relax out here than in the confines of the office.

“Wha...” A shudder jolted through Yokozawa when he finally lifted the cover of his bentou. He knew he hadn't placed anything on top of the rice that morning...but now there was a layer of *nori* on top fashioned in a rather clumsy manner. It had obviously been torn apart by hand...and placed on the rice in the shape of a *heart*. “That bastard...”



This could only be Kirishima's doing. He'd *thought* the guy had been sneaking around with the bentous—and it must have been to do *this*. He found himself at a loss for words with how ridiculous Kirishima could be. If they hadn't fought this morning...he might have been able to laugh it off, but right now, all he was left feeling was *drained*.

“Why the hell am I the one who's sitting here feeling all anxious...” His shock quickly shifted to irritation; he'd been sitting here worrying over this situation on his own, but after muttering to himself over the contents of the bentou, he couldn't help feeling a little pissed off as well.

“Dammit—like hell I'll be the first to break.”

He knew this was sheer childish pride, but he vowed to himself that, this time at least, he wouldn't be the one to yield any ground.

“Ugh...”

What was Yokozawa doing out here? Killing time in a park because he couldn't bring himself to go home—he was acting like a child afraid of being scolded by his mother.

Kirishima had informed him in no uncertain terms the day before that he was to come to the apartment today as well, but he hadn't reminded Yokozawa of the promise yet today—as such, he'd been planning on just going back to his own apartment.

And yet...without realizing it, he'd stepped off the train at the station nearest Kirishima's place. He wavered for a moment, toying with the idea of getting back on the train, but his feet stalled in place. Perhaps it was this inability to make up his mind that had him sitting here on a park bench killing time.

He'd checked to see that Kirishima wasn't around when he'd left the office—given that he hadn't had any meetings scheduled, that likely meant he had already headed home.

At his umpteenth sigh in as many minutes, though, a feral cat came wandering up, rubbing itself against his legs. "...Oi, I'm not in any mood to play with you, so go on. Get," he growled, but this only seemed to draw out even *more* cats. It wasn't as if he was carrying around any treats or anything of the sort—cats just seemed to like him. "Ugh fine, do whatever you want—Ah!"

His cell phone began buzzing in his pocket, giving him more of a shock than it typically would have, perhaps due to his distracted state. He jerked up, sending the cats about his feet skittering away. “Dammit...don’t scare me like that...”

He cautiously checked the caller ID screen...and as expected, there was Kirishima’s name. Unable to bring himself to answer immediately, he stared at the phone buzzing insistently in his hand for a few moments—but it never stopped, continuing to badger him for attention.

He half-considered just cutting the call off, but in the end, he steeled himself and pressed the ‘talk’ button. “...Yes.”

“So you finally answered. You’d better not tell me you’re not planning on coming over tonight, Yokozawa. I’ve already ordered in for two, so hurry and get your ass over here.”

“.....”

The arrogant tone sent an flare of irritation through Yokozawa; as he’d suspected, it really *would* have been best if he’d just canceled the call before answering—and then,

Kirishima continued, a thread of awkwardness laced in his tone.

“Just...if you don’t come home, then...I can’t explain myself.”

“...Huh?” It was as stupid a response as Yokozawa had ever given—but it was all he could muster.

“I mean...just...I’m sorry.”

“...Sorry for *what*, then?”

“You know—about...this morning.” It seemed he was trying to apologize for his behavior earlier, but if the guy wouldn’t explain just what *exactly* he was trying to make amends for, Yokozawa had no real way of responding to his efforts.

“.....” As he was wracking his mind trying to decide just how to continue from here, one of the feral cats wandered close again, pawing at Yokozawa for attention.

“Ow—dammit, cut that out, you little—” he snapped at the animal, cradling the phone in one hand and quieting his voice to keep Kirishima from hearing over the line—but he failed.

“Oi—who’re you with? Don’t tell me you’re seriously cheating on—”

“What the—who the *hell* are you accusing of—?!”

“Then who is it?”

“It’s a *cat*, you idiot!” He hadn’t really wanted Kirishima to know he had a bunch of cats trying to get him to play with them—but he hardly had any choice now.

“...A cat? Wait, where are you?”

“At...the park, near your place.” Kirishima might have suspected he was at someone’s house, and he really was in no mood to have the guy jump to any more ridiculous conclusions. He was fully prepared to be teased mercilessly now for dawdling and dragging his feet to kill time, but the response he received instead was decidedly unexpected.

“...All right, I’m coming to get you, so wait there.”

“Huh? Wait—*coming to get me?* What’re you—” But the line went dead with a click. Was the guy *serious*? Still, after being told to wait here, it was probably best not to

leave now. He stared down at the phone in his hand, the call ended, when another cat made a pass at him. "Dammit, I *told* you I can't play with you right now, so please—just, enough already!" As he stood there, flustered at how to deal with the insistent feline, someone's snorting laughter reached his ears.

"Pffft, hahaha!" The laughter wasn't dying down, and Yokozawa felt a swell of embarrassment at having been caught messing around with a cat. He lifted his head to explain himself—when he found himself staring at a familiar face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh—honestly! I just couldn't help myself. You *really* are a nice person, aren't you, Yokozawa-san?"

"Iokawa-san..."

"Running into each other twice in the same day—must be fate! Almost 'predestined' even, don't you think?"

"I suppose so." Given the similar spheres they walked in, they'd likely encounter one another more and more now—still, it wasn't strange to feel some sort of connection, running into each other as often as they had of late.

“Mind if I sit beside you?”

“Feel free.”

As Iokawa approached the bench, the cats all scattered, fleeing their separate ways.

“Aww, guess they don’t like me.”

“I’m sure they’re just shy.”

“I hope that’s the case; do you frequent this park, Yokozawa-san?”

“I wouldn’t say I *frequent* it, but...” He did like to use it as a shortcut on his way the Kirishimas’ apartment heading back from shopping excursions.

“I like to drop by and have a beer on evenings when the moon is nice. The sakura trees over there blossom beautifully in Spring, so I’ll have my own personal flower viewing party. Though the trees behind my apartment complex are quite nice to look at as well.” The Kirishimas’ complex had a few cherry blossom trees planted on its grounds, allowing residents to enjoy the blossoms for a relatively lengthy period, and Yokozawa had seen a fair few families relaxing outside and taking in the view.

“Do you live alone in your apartment, Iokawa-san?”

“Yes—though I must confess, I’m really only house-sitting for my some relatives while they’re out of the country. They’re letting me live here rent-free while they’re gone in exchange for my watching over the place.”

“Watching over someone else’s stuff always tends to make you be a bit more careful with yourself than usual, huh?” Of course there were perks to living rent-free in such an expansive condominium as these apartments, but caring for the place seemed like it would really work your nerves.

“Indeed. I’m only a transient, so I have to take extra care not to dirty or scratch anything. I always eat out, though, so I’ve managed not to mess up the kitchen at least. I’d always dreamed of living in a really spacious apartment like this, but now that I’ve tried it out...I feel like it’s a bit too much for me. What single man needs a 2LDK all to himself?” He shrugged with a wry laugh.

“You’ve got a point—if all you’re doing is using it to sleep in, a more compact place might feel more manageable.” His busy periods left him loath to cook anything for

himself, and there were times he couldn't even muster the will to clean up around his place. In that sense, Sorata and Hiyori had been something of a godsend. Having someone around who needed caring for helped him weather the tough times.

"Do you live alone as well, Yokozawa-san?"

"Ah—yeah, though I do have a cat." Except that said cat was currently enjoying a comfortable life with the Kirishimas.

"I see—so that explains why you were surrounded like that before. They could probably sense your 'cat-lover aura'!"

"I dunno about that..."

"I'm quite envious; animals don't really tend to like me—they give me quite the wide berth."

"Maybe you're just too stiff around them?" Animals could sense when someone was approaching them nervously, and convincing yourself that you 'weren't good' with them would only lead them to give you plenty of space.

"*Takafumi*," someone called to him, his first name slipping out as Yokozawa moved to

continue the rambling conversation with Iokawa.

Outside of his family, there was only one person who ever called him that. “.....!!” Kirishima had *actually* come to pick him up, and while he was doing his best to hide it, his ragged breath suggested that he’d run the whole way. He was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, while on his feet he wore the sneakers he favored on his days off.

“Good evening, Iokawa-san. Mind if I interrupt your pleasant little chat?”

“Ah, Kirishima-san! Off on a grocery run?” Perhaps the fact that Kirishima was empty-handed had prompted the question.

But Kirishima didn’t mince any words: “No; I’ve come to pick up Yokozawa.”



“Wha...!” Phrasing his intentions like that left room for Iokawa to divine the exact nature of their relationship. It was one thing to speak like that with someone who knew that Kirishima liked to banter about risqué jokes from time to time, but Iokawa had no idea of that aspect to his personality.

“Ah, I see. You two really are close, aren’t you?” Iokawa didn’t seem all that fazed by the comment, simply admiring their ostensibly platonic relationship. Yokozawa sent out a silent prayer of gratitude that the guy didn’t seem all that sharp.

“Indeed; we hear that all the time.” He wanted desperately to find some way to shut the guy up, but he couldn’t afford to make any false moves.

“I must say, I’m quite jealous! Ah—if you don’t mind, would you like to have a drink together some time? I’d love to chat with you as well, Kirishima-san!”

“Absolutely, I’d love to. However—in the future, I’d really appreciate it if you went through me first before speaking with Yokozawa. We’ve got plans together for the foreseeable future, so would you mind keeping your distance?”

A shudder rippled through Yokozawa at how glaringly obvious he was being in his attempts to keep Iokawa at bay. “*Hey—...!!*” he started, turning a furious glare on Kirishima.

“Understood! You almost sound like his *manager!*” Iokawa laughed, thankfully taking Kirishima’s language as joking and utterly failing to grasp the true meaning of it all.

“Well then, we’ll be taking our leave now. We’ve got quite urgent business to attend to, so—let’s head home, Takafumi.” He grabbed Yokozawa’s arm, tugging him up from the bench, and stalked away.

“.....?!” He didn’t even have a chance to bid Iokawa farewell before he was practically dragged off as Kirishima strode away at practically a jog, racing down the path back to the apartment. The fingers digging into Yokozawa’s wrist pained him, and unable to manage to fall in step with Kirishima’s pace, he stumbled frequently along the way. “The hell—stop *dragging me!*”

When he shook off the hand that gripped his own, Kirishima at last slowed his pace. He’d thought they’d managed to restore their

relationship to some degree with the phone call earlier, but now things were just *awkward* yet again. Biting his tongue here...would only lead to a repeat of that morning, though, and with great effort, Yokozawa spoke up in a normal tone. "What was the point in leaving like that, anyway? He lives in the same complex as you, you know."

"I couldn't have lasted another minute with him."

"Huh?"

"No—sorry, just...talking to myself."

Yokozawa let out a great sigh at Kirishima's evasiveness. "Just so you know—the other day and this morning as well were really *just coincidences*. There's nothing going on whatsoever that should give you cause to worry." He made sure to add between the lines that Kirishima had no grounds to be suspicious of anything, which drew an embarrassed grimace.

Kirishima returned, tone a bit peevish as he explained himself, "I know—and I trust you, really I do."

"Then *why*—"

“Because—because I can’t help getting jealous! If it makes you feel any better, I’m just as shocked as you are. I never expected I’d turn out to be so—damn, *small-minded*.”

Realizing that Kirishima also occasionally found himself overwhelmed by an inability to control his emotions...Yokozawa felt the energy slump from his shoulders. Maybe...he’d had unreasonable expectations of the guy all this time.

He was older than Yokozawa, had experienced far more—so somewhere deep inside, he must’ve assumed that he’d be smarter in how he conducted himself. But love robs people of their reason and sense—and if you were able to keep your head in a relationship with someone, then it probably wasn’t *true love* in the first place.

“Sorry for...being such an ass.”

“You say that like you aren’t an ass *all the time*,” he snickered, realizing that Kirishima had finally come to understand how childish he could be.

“Yeah...guess you’ve got a point.”

Yokozawa had to bite back his shock at how easily Kirishima seemed to accept this as

fact—he'd just finished apologizing; wasn't it a bit too soon to be shifting gears like this?

"Then since you seem to *realize it* now, try acting a bit more normal. What if he gets the wrong idea about us?"

"Maybe I wanted him to."

"Huh?"

"Gotta set some boundaries."

"Why do you have it in for that guy? There's no reason for you to hold any grudge against him." When he paused to think about it, that simple question alone lay at the heart of the entire matter. Kirishima was generally pretty easygoing on the outside, and while he had his moments of jealousy, he wasn't the type to direct his ire against people uninvolved in the matter.

"My gut's telling me he's no good."

"How so?"

"Dunno. Just...I can't help getting pissed whenever I see you two chatting it up. What's the harm in a little bit of jealousy?"

"Don't try to turn the blame on to me." In other words, it seemed even Kirishima

himself didn't quite understand the reason behind his actions.

"Just—for fuck's sake, don't let yourself get *hit on* in a park of all places. You're practically defenseless, so I have to sit here biding my jealousy."

"Who the hell was getting *hit on*? You're such an idiot." It was utterly ridiculous, reading simple chatter as flirtation. If Kirishima got jealous over something that trivial, soon enough, he'd start seeing Yokozawa's own coworkers as rivals. Besides, *Yokozawa* had been the one worrying over everything, as far as he saw it; he couldn't abide Kirishima speaking as if he'd been the only victim here.

"I'm just asking you not to go around thoughtlessly making nice with everyone you see."

"Acting rude with *my* features is only gonna scare people away." He had a rather stern expression to begin with, and it didn't change much either. People tended to assume he was in a perpetually bad mood unless he opened his mouth to assure them otherwise, so he made every effort to be as polite as possible to those around him.

“So what? I should be the only one who understands how truly adorable you can be.”

“...Dammit, would you just *cut that out*...!”
When he whipped his head around to glance in Kirishima’s direction, the guy was wearing the same expression he always did, likely pleased with himself at having embarrassed Yokozawa. “*Don’t laugh.*”

“I’m not.” The quaver to his words betrayed the lie, though.

“You sure as hell *are.*”

“I simply find you endearing, that’s all.”

“How is that any different?!” Kirishima’s grin only deepened as Yokozawa responded to his teasing, and on realizing that he was once again being played for the fool in the palm of Kirishima’s hand, he pursed his lips and fell silent.

“...Mind reminding me why two brawny men have to share a bathtub together?”
Yokozawa muttered sourly at their situation.

“C’mon—we’re lovers. I’m cutting you some slack by putting up with just sitting face-to-face, so I don’t wanna hear any complaints.”

“Be reasonable! I just want to take a relaxing bath here!” Kirishima’s tub was relatively spacious, but it hadn’t been made to support two grown men sitting in it together, and they both sat huddled with their legs bent at the knees to keep from bumping into one another.

“Aw, give it a rest; I’ve always dreamed of being able to take a bath together with you, after all.”

“We shared a bath when we went on vacation.” The hotel they’d stayed at over their summer holiday had included a grand bathing area that overlooked the ocean. The vista that greeted them from beyond the glassed-in area looked like something right off of a postcard, and Kirishima had seemed quite pleased with the view.

“That was a bathhouse, though; plus, we weren’t alone.”

“Such a nitpicker; what’s it matter how many people were there? A bath’s a bath.”

“Put a little more thought into the *emotions* involved, would you? The situation’s important for this kind of thing.”

“Whatever.” This wasn’t some trashy manga; he couldn’t let himself get preoccupied with such measly details at every opportunity. He’d initially assumed that Kirishima focused on these things because he was a father—but maybe it was just because he actually liked such events himself. “Mind if I get out now? I’m starting to get dizzy from the heat.”

“Sure—after you count to 100. You always take such quick baths.”

Yokozawa gaped at the tone that smacked of a parent lecturing a child. “I’m not some little brat; I’m seriously feeling faint here.”

“And you *always* make me feel faint.”

“Wha...!” Yokozawa groped for words, at a loss for a response to Kirishima’s seamlessly delivered pretentious line. Kirishima let out a light laugh, seemingly satisfied with having successfully ruffled Yokozawa’s feathers, but Yokozawa ignored him, standing to step out of the tub—when Kirishima snapped a hand out to grab his wrist, tugging him back in. “Uwah—!!” Balance lost, he slipped and toppled backward, landing with a great splash supported in Kirishima’s arms. He’d managed to avoid hurting himself, but he

was now thoroughly soaked by the water he'd displaced with his fall. "What the *hell*—!"

"I never said you could leave. And now look...half our water's gone..."

"Whose fault do you think *that* is?! Let me go, dammit..." Their position now, with Kirishima's arms looped around him from behind, was more than a little embarrassing, and Yokozawa twisted in place, struggling to free himself—but to no avail, as Kirishima's arms coiled about him refused to be moved.

"Oh no you don't; you're crazy if you think I'm letting this chance slip by."

"And I'm saying *I don't like this*." Just *touching* left him feeling awkward enough, so clinging together like this didn't suit him at all. Even their bickering was little more than a farce by this point.

"C'mon—use your words properly. It's not that you *don't like it*—you're just *embarrassed*. Your body's a hell of a lot more honest than your mouth."

"...Ngh, where the hell do you think you're touching?!" he snapped as a hand snaked

down between his legs to slip fingers around his shaft, lazily stroking him to erection.

“Just getting you in the mood, that’s all.”

“Thanks, but *no thanks*.”

This guy really left no chinks in his armor. Try as Yokozawa might to restrain him before he could provoke him, Kirishima quickly took the upper hand, tightening his grip along the stiff shaft.

Yokozawa fought down the cry that clamored for release, but the increasing attentions forced sounds from his throat regardless. He grit his teeth and held back a moan, biting out, “You said...you wouldn’t *do*...anything...” That promise had convinced Yokozawa to grudgingly accede to Kirishima’s request that they bathe together, and while he couldn’t deny that he’d been more than a little naive in his actions, he couldn’t sit silent and just *take it*.

“And you *believed* me?”

“That...was *low*,” he ground out, stalling as Kirishima turned the question back on him. It hadn’t been so much that he’d *believed* Kirishima as he simply hadn’t thought through to this inevitable conclusion.

“Maybe...but you love that about me.”



Yokozawa abandoned all efforts to refute Kirishima's brazen boasting and instead began to actively mount his revolt, bracing his hands against the bathtub edges as he struggled to lift himself from Kirishima's embrace—but he simply hadn't the strength to follow through, at the mercy of Kirishima's expert attentions. "Cut...*it..!*" The remaining water splashed up around them in time with Yokozawa's resistance.

"Now that's just bad manners." Fingers skittered over his skin, outlining the shape of his abs, and lips pressed against the nape of his neck sucked against the skin there. At length, Yokozawa gave up on trying to remove himself bodily from the tub and focused instead on removing Kirishima's arms, gripping tight with his nails as he went on the offensive—but the fingers stroking along his shaft never ceased their attentions.

"Just give up and play along nicely; it's for your own good," Kirishima murmured into Yokozawa's ear, his extremities pinned. He sounded like some cop from a television show, trying to prompt a perp to confess to a crime. Still, Yokozawa had no intention of giving himself over so easily, and even if he wound up putty in Kirishima's hand in the end, it just wasn't in his nature to duck his head and go about things dutifully.

“Who’s...gonna do whatever you say...?”
He tried to tell himself that the dizzy wave sweeping over him was just from the bath—and it was all he could do to bite back the moans that threatened to seep from his throat.

“Good morning!”

“Morning.” With a great yawn, Yokozawa dragged himself over to his desk. Kirishima had kept him up late again, burning the midnight oil the previous night and leaving him utterly exhausted. That was two nights in a row now he hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep, and pushing himself like this, at his age, had left him physically drained. It was great that he’d finally resolved things with Kirishima, but in return, he’d had to once again deal with a rather high-spirited Kirishima as well, and while he’d staunchly refused another bentou-making session or commute together, he’d had a ‘goodbye kiss’ forced on him in the *genkan* as he’d taken his leave.

He definitely shouldn’t show his weak side to Kirishima, he was starting to realize; once the guy got going, there was no stopping him from getting carried away.

Hiyori was supposed to get back from her field trip today, but he was set on heading straight back to his own apartment this evening; he couldn't deal with three straight days of such a giddy Kirishima. He was looking forward to hearing Hiyori regale them with tales of her adventures, but he desperately needed his rest first—ensuring one's own physical health was one's duty as a member of society.

He pulled his planner from his bag, checking the day's schedule, when Henmi glanced over, chuckling lightly. "Yokozawa-san, I see you're wearing another cute tie today! Was it a gift from your girlfriend?"

"Yeah, right—idiot." He'd been wrangled into another necktie coordination session that morning as well, ending up with one of Kirishima's, but he was quite sure it wasn't so strange a pattern it merited Henmi's laughter. However, while it might not have been a shade that really suited him, if he let his discomfort show, it would surely only invite more probing questions, and so he shrugged off the comment—when Henmi's expression shifted to one of complete shock.

"Wait—you don't mean to say *you* bought it yourself, right?"

“What’s with that shocked tone?”

“No, it’s just...” Henmi’s gaze honed in on the tie, and as Yokozawa followed the gaze, glancing down to get a better look at the tie, he noticed that a portion of the fine pattern was made up of bear-shaped silhouettes. Seeing as the images were only perhaps a few millimeters in size, he hadn’t even noticed until Henmi pointed them out.

“.....” As he’d heard it, the tie Kirishima had chosen today had been picked out by Hiyori and her grandmother for Father’s Day the previous year. He’d confessed he hadn’t had much opportunity to wear it before—likely less due to his line of work and more due to *this pattern*. He now realized that this had been the reason Kirishima had been grinning like a loon when he’d seen Yokozawa off that morning—and the reason the high school girls standing in front of him on the train had been snickering, too. While it might have suited someone as baby faced as Henmi, there was no way it was doing any favors to someone like Yokozawa.

The tie he’d borrowed the day before had been rather gaudy but still of relatively normal design; he’d let his guard down regarding his chest area when leaving the

apartment that morning, though, and shame began to well up from within.

“So...did you really pick it out yourself?”

“I—I borrowed it, of course! There’s no way in hell I’d buy something like this for myself!”

“Borrowed it? From whom? Takano-san...wouldn’t own something like that, probably. Ah—then perhaps Kirishima-san?”

“...I’m going to return it.” He pulled out the back-up tie he kept in his desk drawer and stood to leave. Nothing would’ve happened if he hadn’t noticed it, but now that he’d realized the reason he’d garnered so much attention all day, he couldn’t possibly keep it on.

“Aww, what’s the harm? I think it’s quite fetching, really cute!”

“...Henmi. You’re smiling.” He fixed a sharp glare on his subordinate, who’d directed his attentions elsewhere, expression betraying his attempts to fight back his laughter. “*Dammit.*” He quickly departed the sales floor, tugging off the tie as he headed for a bathroom with a mirror in it.

Chapter 8

“I’m back! Got my letter mailed off!” Hiyori announced upon returning from her errand at the convenience store. She’d apparently made friends when she’d gone to spend her summer vacation with her maternal grandparents, and they traded details of their lives of late via letter. It was a very Hiyori-esque thing to do—opting for snail mail over texting these days—and apparently she’d always dreamed of sending letters back and forth to friends in faraway places. She’d also enjoyed picking out stationery and writing utensils just for sending her letters, being sure to show Yokozawa the new pieces she’d selected.

“Welcome back, Hiyo.”

“Wow, it smells great in here!” she delighted, peeking into the kitchen—and she was quite right, as not only the kitchen but the entire apartment was filled with a sweet fragrance.

Hiyori had shown an interest of late in confectioneries, apparently having thoroughly enjoyed herself in making pudding with Yokozawa. She’d always had a talent for cooking, and everything she touched seemed to come out delicious.

Today, she'd been working all morning preparing a batch of madeleines. Apparently they were her grandmother's favorite, so she'd been hard at work practicing the recipe in preparation for the woman's upcoming birthday. Yokozawa had been drafted to help, as Hiyori's father Kirishima was all thumbs in the kitchen. Letting a guy who couldn't even properly peel apples into the kitchen was only inviting trouble.

"Probably about time for them to finish baking." The timer reminded them there were only five minutes left on the bake time, and the dough visible through the oven window had taken on a golden brown hue.

"Really? Can we try them when they're done? Or should we wait til they've cooled off some?"

"They're probably tastier piping hot from the oven. I'll start getting everything ready, so run and wash up."

"Okay, I'll be right back!"

According to the clock, it was almost 3 PM—a perfect time for a snack. As he was preparing the tea, the oven dinged its completion, and Hiyori returned just as

Yokozawa was pulling the baking sheet from the oven.

“Wooooow, they really baked up nicely!”

“Check and make sure they’re baked all the way through.”

“Oh, right!” The recipe had instructed them to use a toothpick to test the doneness. Yokozawa had never had occasion to try baking sweets until recently, but he’d realized that with a little practice and grasp of a few basics, he could manage. “They look fine, Oniichan!”

“Then grab a plate—one big enough to hold them all.”

“How about the one with the floral pattern?”

“Sure—that should be just the right size, I think.” Lifting the madeleines one by one from the mold, he carefully set them onto the plate Hiyori had brought over. It was apparently a plate from one of her late mother’s favorite brands, and the Kirishimas had a whole matching place setting as well.

Hiyori took one of the madeleines and placed it on a smaller plate, bringing it over

to the small family shrine they kept for her mother.

“...Ooh, those look pretty tasty.”

“...! Oi, don’t sneak up on people like that!” Yokozawa snapped, jolting when Kirishima peeked over his shoulder to see what he was up to. He *really* wished the guy would stop pulling this kind of stuff while Hiyori was around.

“Can we try them?”

“That’s what I’m making preparations for right now. If you’ve got nothing to do, grab some cups for the table.”

“Yes sir~ Mugs are fine, right?”

“Ask Hiyo.”

“Hiyo! Which cups should we use for the tea?”

“I want to drink out of the floral-pattern tea cups!” The cups sitting ready with tea leaves and the matching teapot were part of a set they’d recently uncovered while tidying up—apparently part of the larger set of flatware Kirishima had received as a wedding gift years before. They hardly ever used it, so when they’d moved into this

apartment, it had apparently been packed away. Hiyori had been the one to stop them from setting it back deep into the closet again with, "I'll use it!" Apparently she'd learned how to pour tea after spending an afternoon at a friend's house recently and wanted to try it herself.

The sight of the table, laden with the tea set and madeleines, reflected a rather domestic atmosphere, and Yokozawa mused with no small amount of joy that just six months ago, he never could have imagined himself enjoying this kind of life.

"Oh right, there was a letter in the mailbox, Dad!"

"Ah, thanks—looks like it's from the complex's Children's Association." He pulled the folded paper from the envelope she handed him, passing his gaze over the contents. "Hm, seems they're going to have a Halloween party next month. Children up through elementary school can participate, and the Children's Association will supply snacks. You'll have to put a costume together yourself, though."

"The people in this apartment complex sure are sticklers for their events." Between flower viewing sessions and summer

festivals, they were always looking for new ways to foster friendships between residents with the changing seasons. Even Kirishima, who was often away from his single-father home, made every effort to attend the functions whenever he could, it seemed.

“Well, it’s easy to lose contact with your neighbors when you’re living someplace like this—so they go out of their way to help people keep in touch with one another. What do you think, Hiyo? I’ll let them know you’re in if you want to go.”

“Sounds like fun! Can I ask Yuki-chan and the others first, though?”

“Of course; make sure to ask about a costume, too. But enough about that—can we try these now?”

“Sure—dig in!” She kept her gaze trained on Kirishima as he brought one of the madeleines to his mouth, apparently curious as to how they tasted, fresh out of the oven as they were. “...Well?”

“Delicious. So good I could see them selling in any restaurant right now.”

“Seriously? Thank goodness!”

“Absolutely—they baked up nicely.” The bake time and sweetness were perfect—at this rate, it’d be easy to eat a dozen without batting an eye. Hiyori nibbled her own madeleine before breaking out into a wide smile. Yokozawa himself admittedly wasn’t really one for sweets, so it was something of a mystery as to just why he found the treats that Hiyori baked particularly tasty. “I’m sure your grandmother will love ‘em.”

“I hope so... Hey, Oniichan? I kind of want to try another flavor...what do you think?”

“Another flavor?”

“Like strawberry, or green tea. Ah! But black tea might be tasty too!”

“I can’t see why not. Wanna try again next time?” There was still time until her grandmother’s birthday, so it wouldn’t hurt to experiment a bit—he could already picture the woman beaming in his mind.

“That reminds me...when’s *your* birthday?” Kirishima casually asked, reaching for a third madeleine.

“Oh, I never mentioned it? June 18th,” he returned easily, without giving it much thought—when the pair before him froze for

a moment, before turning on him in stereo with:

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?!”



“I—I’m sorry?” Kirishima’s and Hiyori’s twin glares had him quailing. He did feel bad about neglecting to mention his birthdate, but he never would have expected them to react with such fury just by revealing it now.

“That’s two days after *mine*, dammit!”

“If I’d know, we could’ve celebrated yours and Dad’s together!”

Yokozawa’s vision swam as the pair railed against him, one after another. “I...I just had a lot going on and forgot...” He’d been so utterly preoccupied at the time with thoughts of Kirishima’s birthday, he hadn’t even had a chance to think about his own.

“As if that’s any excuse!”

“I can’t believe you could forget your own birthday!”

“But—who really cares about my birthday? I’m not at an age where anyone really celebrates anymore.” But the words he’d meant to soothe their ruffled feathers only served to further fan the flames.

“Geez, you just don’t get it!” Hiyori puffed her cheeks out irritably, standing in anger,

and after setting her tea cup in the sink, she stormed off to her room.

“Hiyo—I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to...”
Yokozawa figured he hadn’t been as tactful as he ought to have been, but he couldn’t really grasp what was so bad about the whole situation. At the very least, it seemed that his attempt to apologize hadn’t been the best idea.

“Yiiiiikes, you really pissed her off,”
Kirishima chuckled as he watched Yokozawa grope for a response, and while Yokozawa would usually have snapped back at him for this, right now the regret he felt at angering Hiyori was a bigger matter, and he couldn’t bring himself to engage in any sharp banter.

“Wh...what do I do now?”

The gaze Kirishima returned to him as he sought advice in his confusion, though, was steeped in irritation. “Just so you know, I’m pretty damn pissed too—how the hell could you wait this long to tell us? You’re telling me you forgot your own birthday for *three whole months*?”

“Not like I did it on purpose! I really just couldn’t remember.” The only times he ever

really paid much attention to his birthdate were the years when he needed to go in to renew his driver's license.

"Well, it'd be nice if Hiyo accepted that, but..."

"I mean, I'm 28 years old. Who pays attention to their birthday at that age?" Yokozawa was one of the more diligent types among his circle of acquaintances, but he never paid all that much attention to himself. And even if he had remembered, he likely wouldn't have gone out of his way to bring it up. Most years, it was months later before he even remembered it.

"God you're such an idiot. Your birthday's the day people celebrate you being born! It's something to celebrate no matter your age."

"Well, sure, I understand that, but..."

"No—you obviously *don't* understand. As far as Hiyo sees it, you've just pissed on one of the most important days of the year to her. How would you feel if she didn't tell you her birthday and it passed without celebration?"

"....." He completely understood where Kirishima was coming from now and had no

place to refute him. He'd told himself that it was simple a matter of the importance of the day being different for the 10-year-old Hiyori from the 28-year-old Yokozawa—but perhaps he'd just been reassuring himself.

“...So? Have we reflected a bit on what we've done?”

“...Yes.”

“Well, I'm sure she'll get over it eventually. Just leave her be for now.”

“...I sure hope so.” Previously, he'd been able to convince her to forgive him after copious apologizing and promises of treats, but he wasn't sure it would be quite that easy this time—not least of all because snack time was over for the day.

Still, going to confront her in her room might just draw her ire all the more, so he opted to take Kirishima's advice and see how things panned out.

As he'd suspected, Kirishima's consolation had granted nothing more than temporary peace of mind.

“.....”

Hiyori had yet to forgive Yokozawa for not telling her about his birthday. Most days, she would've been filling his phone's inbox with tales of what she'd done at school that day or pictures of Sorata, but this entire week, he hadn't received a single note from her—with no responses to any messages he sent himself either.

He naturally had reflected deeply upon his lack of tact, but he'd never expected her anger with him to last *this* long. Still there was nothing to be done about it now.

He found himself glancing at his cell phone over and over, like some addict hoping against hope for a fix, but no new messages greeted him, and he wracked his brain for how exactly to go about begging her forgiveness.

“Yokozawa-san, what's wrong? You've seemed really down lately...”

“...Nothing.” Hiyori was still pissed at him; of *course* he was going to be depressed. Henmi's blithe expression grated more so than usual today.

“That doesn't *seem* like a ‘nothing’ face, though? Did you have a fight with your

girlfriend? Oh—wait, you said you didn't have one, right?"

"....." He fixed a scathing glare on Henmi for his presumptive commentary, but since he wasn't facing Yokozawa, it had no effect.

"Cheer up! You don't seem yourself when you're not being all intense and intimidating!"

"...Mind your own business." If it'd been Kirishima he was fighting with, he might be able to come up with some solution to the whole issue on his own—but this was *Hiyori*. The fault lay entirely with him, but despite doing everything he could to make it up to her, he still couldn't earn her forgiveness. He'd run out of options.

"Oh, hey! Why not discuss your worries with Kirishima-san? He seems like he understands the way women think."

"Moron—as if I could ever..." *do that*, he'd started to say, but cut himself off. Asking Kirishima to help him mend this fence might be the only way to resolve things, and while he wasn't entirely sure Kirishima would be able to offer might help, he was Hiyori's

father and therefore understood her better than anyone else.

“...Yokozawa-san?”

“Forget it. Besides—are you sure you should be babbling away with me? If you’re finished with the work on hand, I’ll be glad to find more for you to handle.”

At Yokozawa’s suggestion, Henmi grew flustered and quickly scrambled back to his desk, engrossing himself in the contents of his computer screen. “That’s...quite all right. I’ve got more than enough on my plate as it is!”

After ensuring that no one else was paying him any attention, Yokozawa slid out his cellphone and glanced at the screen—once again, no new messages from Hiyori.

“.....” After some hesitation, he fired off a text to Kirishima. This meant he’d likely find himself once more indebted to the guy, but sometimes sacrifices had to be made for the greater good.

In exchange for helping Yokozawa with his problems, it was decided that they share a few drinks at Yokozawa’s apartment—partly because Yokozawa really wasn’t keen on

spilling his sob story in public, but also at the personal request of Kirishima. After having picked up some snacks and booze on his way home, Yokozawa flipped on the lights in his apartment.

He hadn't had occasion to do much tidying up lately, but given that he didn't spend much time at home to begin with, it wasn't really all that messy, and while there was a little dust building up in the corners of the entryway, he doubted Kirishima would notice.

"I'm coming in~ Damn, this place is as empty as usual..."

"Pipe down." He couldn't defend the dreary atmosphere, but the lack of much of anything around the room was mostly due to Sorata. Given the cat's tendency to jump and climb, he couldn't leave things just sitting around, and even though Sorata didn't make it back here too often, now that he was staying with the Kirishimas, not much had changed. "I'll get everything ready, so make yourself comfortable."

"Need any help?"

"You'll just get in the way; have a seat." He slid the beers into the fridge and, after

washing the rice, set the rice cooker before taking out plates to hold the snacks he'd bought. Even for the instant dishes, it was just too sad to leave them in their plastic wrap.

"You can really tell a lot about a person by looking at their bookshelf... You not only have everything organized by author name—you've also got them categorized alphabetically by *publishing house*. The hell are you, a *bookstore*?"

"It's easier to find them that way; make sure you put anything you take out back where you found it." Despite being told to take a seat, Kirishima had taken it upon himself to go investigate the contents of the bookshelf in Yokozawa's bedroom, it seemed. He was a little curious as to what the guy was up to, but it was nothing to scold him over. He didn't keep anything he might be embarrassed to be seen owning just lying around out in the open, after all—not that he felt he owned anything deserving to be hidden to begin with.

"What the...you told me you didn't need this magazine! And here I find you *bought your own copy*. I'd have given you one for free if you'd just told me..."

“Hey—what the hell are you doing going through people’s things without asking?!”
He dashed into the bedroom, frantic; he was *sure* he’d hidden the magazine where no one would find it—but when he found Kirishima standing in front of the bookshelf...there was nothing in his hands.

“...So you *did* buy it.”

“.....” He grit his teeth, realizing he’d been quite handily tricked by Kirishima, now leering at him knowingly—how could he have been so *stupid*?

“...Want an extra copy to keep for storage?”

“Hell no.” The ‘magazine’ Kirishima spoke of was, of course, the women’s magazine containing the interview and photoshoot images Kirishima had posed for recently. He’d kept it secret that he’d wound up purchasing a copy for himself, storing it deep inside his closet, as he was far too embarrassed to have the thing lined up on his bookshelf.

“Aww, what—shy now, are we?”

“*No.*”

“Now *that* kind of puffed-up response just makes it seem all the more suspicious. Spit it out—what were you gonna use it for?”

“Who the hell would *use it* for anything?!”

“Ah—did you imagine its ‘uses’ just now? You’re *blushing*, you know. Probably were thinking of something dirty, right?”

“Who would...”

“Shall I make a guess? Let’s see...you’d probably wind up—”

“*Cut it out*,” he snapped, shoving Kirishima bodily down onto the bed at their side as he continued to mercilessly tease. He knew he couldn’t compete with Kirishima when it came to conversation, but while the guy might have the upper hand on him in sheer physical strength, Yokozawa was confident he stood a chance if he caught him unawares. “How long are you gonna stand there running that mouth of yours?”

“Ooh, someone’s feisty today. Can’t say I mind having the tables turned like this.”

“...How the hell do you manage to see everything in such a positive light?” No matter how Yokozawa raged at him, all his

complaints breezed over Kirishima like wind through willow branches.

Kirishima chuckled lightly, both hands restrained as they were, as Yokozawa hung his head in defeat. “Because I’m in love, of course.”

“...You’re supposed to sleeptalk *after* you go to sleep.” He couldn’t keep up with Kirishima’s quips—but when he moved to rise again, he found his hips tugged back down, nearly causing him to flop down on top of Kirishima. “What the hell—”

“*You’re* the one who pushed *me* down—how can you call yourself a man after getting my hopes up like this?”

“I’m not *getting your hopes up*.” He’d only meant to put a stop to Kirishima’s teasing, but it didn’t seem to have worked at all.

“Mmm, heading back home the morning after might not be bad once in a while. Hiyo’s staying with my mother, after all, and Hiyo’s taking care of Sorata, so...”

“Wait—you mean to *spend the night*?”

“You don’t mind, right? And we’re already in bed, so why not take advantage of the situation?”

“That’s not what I brought you here for!”
He’d intended on consulting Kirishima about Hiyori—they didn’t have time to mess around like this.

“C’mon, loosen up a bit—s not like you don’t *want* to.”

“~~~~ngh, watch where you’re touching!”
Kirishima had stroked a finger down his spine, sending a shudder racing up his back. Things were bound to escalate if they stayed this close, and with some trepidation, Yokozawa tried again to lift himself off—but given the vice-like grip Kirishima had on his hips, all he could do was lift his upper body and place some distance between their faces.

“It’s your fault for being so *sensitive*.”

“Stop blaming every little thing on *me*.”

“Ah, I see—so then it’s just that I’m *that good*. I do agree that that’s part of the problem.”

“It wasn’t a compliment—now let me go, dammit. I’m not in the mood for this today.”

“Really, now?” Kirishima slid his leg between Yokozawa’s knees, spreading them and brushing his groin against Yokozawa’s insistently, encouraging his already-hardening member into a full erection with the unexpected attention.

“.....!”

“Not in the mood, huh?”

“Cut that—a-anyone would react if someone did that to them!”

“Ah, but the male form is a delicate thing. You wouldn’t be in this state if you really truly weren’t on board.”

“Hng...stop...*that*...”

“What’s the point in playing coy now of all times? When we know each other’s bodies from *stem* to *stern*.”

“Stop...using weird phrases like that! Just shut your mouth altogether, would you?!”

“Hey—you know how to keep me quiet, right? Or do we need a demonstration?”

“Stifle it!” At this point, it was easier to just give in to the guy’s provocation, and after jerking loose his necktie and unbuttoning his

collar, Yokozawa leaned down and sealed Kirishima's lips with his own, shoving his tongue inside in a fit of irritation.

Kirishima accepted the kiss with remarkable ease and enthusiasm, tugging Yokozawa's shirt free from his trousers. As Kirishima proceeded to stroke his hips and back where he could find purchase, Yokozawa responded by deepening the kiss even further.

"Hnn...ngh..." Kirishima's hands dropped down to caress his hips at this 'retaliation', as it was, and Yokozawa, intent on keeping the upper hand, slid his knee over to press against Kirishima's groin. He'd just decided to press through like this and give Kirishima a good fucking, though, when the guy slipped his hand around and gave Yokozawa's ass a tight squeeze. Yokozawa froze, limbs stiff, and taking advantage of this chink in his armor, Kirishima rolled them over to reverse their positions in one smooth movement. "Wha-?!"

"Yeah...I think I like it better like this. Don't you?"

"D-don't ask me to *agree* with you!"

"Oh? You'd rather ride me?"

“That’s *not* what I meant!” Hoping to take back the upper hand, he struggled to shift their positions back around again, but it was no use.

“Tut tut, how naive.” Using his left arm to press against Yokozawa’s collarbone to hold him in place, Kirishima slipped off his belt with his right.

Accepting that he likely wouldn’t be able to turn the tables again now, Yokozawa reached for Kirishima’s waist to return the favor, but held down as he was, he hand couldn’t stretch far enough. “Nngh...”

As Yokozawa groped about, though, Kirishima shoved his hand into Yokozawa’s exposed underwear, gripping him tight and pulling a gasp from Yokozawa’s throat at the sensation of fingers wrapped around him. Already half-hard from the attentions thus far, the gentle, lazy strokes set his hips to trembling. With great effort, though he managed to maintain some grip on his consciousness, not giving himself up entirely to the pleasure, and summoned his strength to shove Kirishima away.

He couldn’t manage to press the guy back down onto the bed entirely, but he did manage to at least get him up and off his

body, and before Kirishima could resume his position, he stretched his hand to Kirishima's waist and quickly loosened the fastener to his pants, slipping his hand inside just as Kirishima had done for him.

"Oh *my*, how very bold of you~"

"...Ugh, keep that creepy tone out of your voice."

While Yokozawa was distracted, put off by the pitch that could only have been more teasing harassment, Kirishima took the opportunity to renew his attentions.

"Shouldn't drop your guard."

"That's...not fair..."

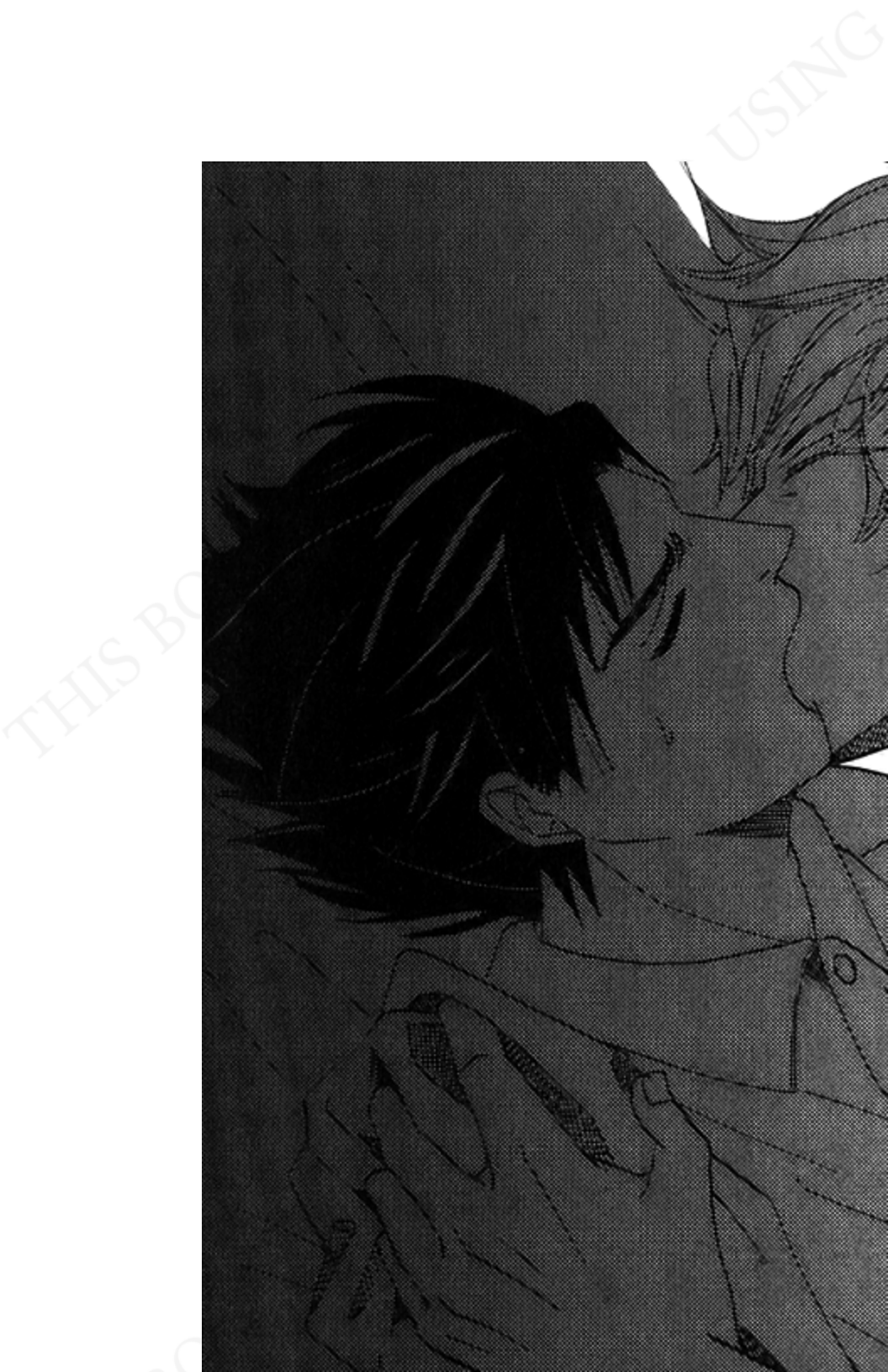
"Hey, my plan worked—that's all," he gloated, grinning like a child who'd just pulled off a prank as his fingers, skilled and experienced, continued to drive Yokozawa wild. He shoved Yokozawa's underwear down further, exposing him fully, and immediately upon freeing him from the confines, Kirishima's strokes intensified.

"Haa...*ah*...!" The liquid seeping out smoothed the way for the fingers, and the slick sensation only increased the pleasure, sapping Yokozawa of all conscious thought.

Try as he might to return the favor, though, he just couldn't collect his thoughts enough to focus properly on the task at hand, and while Kirishima's shaft in his hand was indeed hardening, it was hard to tell who was closer to climax.

"Lift your face up."

"What...for-~~nngh~~...!" The biting kiss he received at this came as a shock, Kirishima's tongue slipping inside and making a sweep of his mouth, leaving him bewildered as Kirishima suckled sharply on his tongue, enough to numb it.



He could barely catch his breath, but his body continued to heat up, as if the very blood in his veins was boiling over. “Hnn...nn!” The heat began to form a scorching fireball, running wild, and with but a light brush of fingertips with barely any power behind it, he quickly found his climax. “Ngh...!!” With a juddering jolt of his hips, his passion exploded forth, and he clenched his teeth as he rode the waves that followed.

“Hey...mine’s not gonna jerk itself off.”

“Shut...up...ngh...” And hoping to achieve at least some tiny measure of revenge, he nipped the softly leering Kirishima in the neck, like a cornered rat fighting back against a cat.

Their passionate romp didn’t last for too long, and while he’d had his initial reason for inviting Kirishima over pushed to the side after rising to meet Kirishima’s challenge (only to promptly fall back into his grasp)—Yokozawa hadn’t forgotten it by any means. He was simply recouping.

“Whew, I ate like a *pig*! Yokozawa—tea.”

“You’re a *guest*, dammit. Practice a little tact, would you?” he grouched, but given that he was already rising to his feet to go and pour the tea as requested, he only had himself to blame. It was precisely because he spoiled Kirishima like this that the guy got such a big head.

“So—what exactly was it you wanted to talk about again...?”

“Don’t *forget*! We’re here to talk about *Hiyo*!”

“Ooohhh, right right. Sorry.”

“.....” He fixed a sharp glare on Kirishima, his apology delivered lightly as a feather. Yokozawa was rather dubious as to whether or not the guy even intended to offer any *serious* advice.

“Well—personally I really don’t think it’s anything to get all that worked up about.”

“Then why the hell isn’t she returning any of my texts?” If apologizing was all he needed to do, then he’d go over to their apartment right now and hang his head to beg forgiveness. But on considering that she might find his dogged persistence annoying,

he couldn't bring himself to take that next step.

"Nah, it's fine. She's just having a little hissy fit is all, I'm sure."

"You're only saying that because you're her father." Yokozawa's relationship with Hiyori could be likened to that of friends—albeit with quite an age-gap between them—and while Yokozawa knew how to handle people his own age, he keenly felt the generation gap when faced with a 10-year-old little girl.

When they'd first met, her young, childish side had been more prominent, but lately she'd taken to showing a more mature, adult side. As such, there was no doubt in Yokozawa's mind that she'd soon display the moodiness characteristic to girls going through puberty—which was all the more reason he didn't want to screw up this matter.

"You're freaking out over nothing—have a little faith in Hiyori. She's not as small-minded as all that."

"Well, yeah, I know, but still..."

“If you’re so worried—why not talk to her yourself? Ask her how you can work yourself back into her good graces. Roundabout approaches won’t work on her, after all.”

“Yeah...you’ve got a point. I guess that’d be best...” Hiyori wasn’t the type to hurt someone else without good reason; the only times she ever really got pissed were when she was seriously upset about something.

He sighed, sipping the warm tea; he felt he’d managed to arrange his thoughts into some semblance of order now that he’d had Kirishima listen to his sad story. “...Oh, that reminds me—didn’t you say you had something you wanted to talk to me about, too?” When he’d brought up the discussion with Kirishima earlier, he’d mentioned wanting to speak with Yokozawa about something as well.

“Right right—listen up: something *serious* is going down in the Kirishima family. Something *bad*.”

“Serious...?” Yokozawa was immediately on guard, given the serious expression Kirishima fixed him with. Had...something happened to Hiyori?

“Listen up—and try not to faint from shock, okay?”

“What the hell are you gearing up to reveal? Spit it out already!” he snapped, irritation rising.

“This Saturday...Hiyo is going on a *date*.”

“A—DATE?! She’s too young for that!” His chair clattered with a loud clang as he leapt to his feet, a beer can on the table toppling over and spilling its contents. Thankfully, it had been mostly empty, so the damage was minimal, but Yokozawa had bigger concerns just at the moment.

“Well, as she puts it, it’s not a date, apparently. She said they’re just going shopping—but the point is, she’s going with *a boy*.”

“That sure as hell sounds like a date to me! Who’s she going with?”

“Iokawa-kun, apparently.”

“!!” On logical consideration, the ‘Iokawa’ Kirishima was referring to here was not the uncle but rather the nephew, Hiyori’s classmate. While Yokozawa didn’t know what Hiyori was taking this outing of theirs

to be, the boy himself almost assuredly saw this as nothing less than a real *date*. While it was a sight better than Hiyori going out with some kid they'd never heard of before, it was still hard to shake the worry that came with the two of them being left to their own devices.

Remembering that he was still standing, Yokozawa cleared his throat and returned to his seat. "S—so when she says they're going 'shopping'...where would that be?"

"You remember that shopping center we all three went to together the other day, right? Apparently that's where they're heading."

"That's *totally* a date!" He clenched his fists, reining in the urge to leap to his feet once more. The shopping center had not only restaurants, but a game center, movie theater, event space and more. Shopping together was bad enough—like *hell* he was going to sit idly by while she sat alone in a dark movie theater with some kid who wanted to make a move on her!

He'd been completely focused on trying to get Hiyori to forgive him until just a moment ago—but now, he couldn't care less, and he began to barrage Kirishima with questions. "How big a group are they going

in? You're not gonna tell me they're going
alo—"

"Just the two of them, it seems."

"Why the fuck would you allow that?!"

"Not like I had much choice in the matter! If I'd told her no without any particular reason for forbidding it, she might start paying more attention to this kid! Plus—I don't want her thinking I'm some annoying parent who nags her all the time." It wasn't as if Yokozawa couldn't sympathize with those feelings, but shouldn't he have played the bad guy there?!

"But—what if something happens?!" The one time he'd seen the boy, he'd seemed like a very serious, polite young man—so there was no logical reason to be uneasy about Hiyori spending time with him, but worrying about this sort of thing was seldom logical.

"I've got a plan."

"A plan?"

At Yokozawa's repetition of his response, Kirishima's expression waxed mysterious as he explained the details of said plan: "I'm thinking of following her that day."

“...Yeah, that’s *not a good idea*,” he fired back at the staggeringly audacious suggestion. That was just going too far in violating Hiyori’s privacy.

“What’re you acting all high and mighty for? You can’t tell me you’re not curious, too.”

“Of course I’m curious; but what if she sees you?”

“I’ll just have to make sure she doesn’t.”

“.....” He’d thought that perhaps the guy had come up with some brilliant scheme—but now it seemed he hadn’t thought this through in the least. He could feel a headache bearing down upon him.

“If it looks like our cover’s gonna be blown—we can just pretend like we’re having a conversation and get lost in the crowd.”

“Wait—now *I* have to come with you?!”

“Of course! What did you think?”

Two grown men over 180 cm in height would stand out enough as it was; if they got caught stalking some elementary school kids through a shopping center, there was no way in hell they weren’t going to get reported.

He was already treading on thin ice with Hiyori; he didn't think he'd be able to recover their relationship if she came to hate him any more than she likely already did. She'd never give him another chance after this.

"Go on your own; don't drag me into your hair-brained scheme."

"So what, you're not worried about Hiyori?"

"Just because I'm worried about her doesn't give me any right to *stalk* her!"

"We won't be stalking her—we'll be *watching over* her."

"That's the very definition of splitting hairs."

"Don't sweat the small stuff—now, the first step in forming our strategy will involve *knowing our enemy*."

"Are you even listening to me?" Kirishima ignored his warning, whipping out his planner instead and running his gaze over the contents.

"Let's see now... Iokawa Yuuto; age 10. Fifth grader. Of average height compared to his classmates, with reasonable grades—but

he's bad at Japanese. He's good at sports and popular with both his male and female classmates but has no girlfriend at present."

"Who the hell told you all that?"

"Hiyo, of course."

"How'd you get her to spill?"

"Just asked. Told her I wanted to know what kind of kid the boy who dropped by the other day was."

"....." The fact that she responded to the questioning without batting a lash suggested that she didn't have any special feelings for the boy, and while this relieved Yokozawa to a degree, it also filled him with a twinge of pity for the poor kid.

"Now then—we'll rendezvous at the station on Saturday. They're supposed to meet at 10 AM, so I figure 9:50 will be fine for us. I'll have to make sure to head out before her—oh, and be sure to wear something inconspicuous."

"Hold up—I never said I'd go!" He attempted to correct Kirishima, who seemed to be making plans for the both of them as he pleased, but Kirishima didn't seem put off in

the least, babbling on with confidence. One of these days, Yokozawa really wanted to find out just where such confidence came from.

“Nah, you’ll definitely come.”

“The hell I will.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. My predictions tend to be accurate,” he responded, a fearless smile plastered across his features in the face of Yokozawa’s obstinate refusal.

After much deliberation...Yokozawa eventually headed out for the location at which Kirishima had suggested they meet up. He was not, he wanted to be clear, intending on following Hiyori on her date; he was going along to keep an eye on Kirishima; however, despite reminding himself of this fact, he couldn’t help the frustration that came with once again being talked into going along with what Kirishima wanted.

Glancing around to try and spot Kirishima’s form in the crowded station, he found him hiding behind a pillar and peeking over at the ticket gates. Just beyond his eyeline, he

could see that Hiiori was already here. However, despite feeling nothing but an overpowering sense of foreboding, he reminded himself that he couldn't turn back now.

"...Do you have any idea how suspicious you look right now?"

"Hah, I knew you'd show up. Didn't I tell you my predictions tend to hit?"

"....." Rather than his prediction being right, Yokozawa almost felt like he'd been threatened into coming along, and upon realizing once again that he was going to be stuck playing detective all day like this, he could only breathe a haggard sigh.

"Get over here. Hiyo'll spot you standing around like that." Kirishima grabbed him by the arm and jerked him behind the pillar as well, and Yokozawa did his level best to conceal himself behind a pillar that could hardly be called perfect for hiding the both of them.

"Somehow I feel like we stick out even more hiding like this..." Two grown men peeking out from the shadows to spy on elementary schoolers was beyond suspicious. If they weren't careful, they

were going to find themselves reported to the police.

“What the hell are you wearing, anyways? Hats don’t suit you at all...”

“Shut your trap; you’re the one who said to come in disguise, and this is all I had...” He was decked out in jeans and a hoodie he hardly ever wore, along with a baseball cap he’d dug out of the deepest corners of his closet tugged down low over his eyes—but honestly, he couldn’t help thinking he somehow looked *more* suspicious in this shady getup. “Yeah, well what about you? What’s with those glasses? Are they just for show?”

Kirishima’s outfit was a style Yokozawa hadn’t seen him in much before as well. The mostly black clothes he was wearing were probably to help blend in with the crowd, but Kirishima’s general appearance always tended to draw looks from others.

“There’s a low-level prescription in them. I bought them a while back, but they give me a headache if I wear them for too long, so I had them put away. Never thought they’d see use in this context, though, I have to admit...”

“What’s the camera for, then? Don’t tell me you’re gonna *take pictures* of them?”

“I was think of playing the part of a tourist.”

“... You don’t look *one bit* like a tourist.”

From the top of his head to the tips of his toes, nothing about him seemed casual or comfortable.

“Well, we’ll be fine. No one’ll pay any attention to us, trust me.” Yokozawa wasn’t so sure the guy attracting looks from passers-by just by *standing there* had any place saying that kind of thing—but if he brought it up, he’d only be giving Kirishima a backhanded compliment, so he buttoned his lip, opting to change the subject instead.

“What’d you tell her when you left?”

“That I had some work-related business to attend to.”

“How the hell is this *work-related*?”

“Hey—I didn’t lie to her. Worrying about his precious daughter is a father’s job.”

“And that’s what they call a *play on words*.”

“Ooh—the Iokawa boy has arrived!”

“.....” Kirishima seriously had no intention of listening to him, it seemed, and finally giving up on schooling the man, Yokozawa turned his gaze toward the ticket gates as Kirishima had done.

Iokawa Yuuto had shyly made his way over to Hiyori now and seemed to be apologizing for something—perhaps for making her wait? He then darted over to the ticket machine alone before purchasing a ticket and returning, seeming to have paid for Hiyori’s ticket as well. Yokozawa had to admit, for an elementary school kid, he was pretty competent in this kind of thing. He never would’ve been able to practice that sort of tact with women when he was Yuuto’s age.

“All right, time for us to get moving too,” Kirishima suggested, stepping out once he’d made sure Hiyori and Yuuto had passed through the ticket gates. They slipped down the opposite stairwell from the pair and kept casual watch from the platform. Yuuto seemed to be nervous as anything, but Hiyori was cool as a cucumber, no different from usual.

“That reminds me—just what were they going to buy? Did Hiyo say anything?”

“Nope—she dug in her heels and abjectly refused to say.”

“A shopping trip won’t take long though. You think they’ll go see a movie, too?”

“They might... Wanna join them?”

“...What the hell are you really doing this for?”

“Stalking plus a date.”

“Don’t you mean *stalking them on a date*?”

“Nope—you heard me. Stalking. Plus—a date. Think of it kind of like a double-date.”

“Wha...?!” He may very well have been goading Yokozawa into coming along for this purpose from the very beginning.

“It’s kinda fun, though, right?”

“...I’m leaving.”

“What’re you talking about? Look—the train’s here.” Kirishima snapped a hand out and grabbed Yokozawa by the arm as he turned on his heel to leave, tugging him into the nearest car of the train that had just pulled into the station.

“Let me-go-!”

“Make a scene and Hiyo’ll catch us.”

“.....”

“We’ve come this far—may as well see it through to the end.”

The doors of the train slid shut with a hiss as Yokozawa let out a deep, beleaguered sigh.

“They’re coming out—hide!”

At Kirishima’s urging, Yokozawa quickly slipped into the shadows to hide himself, and with a sigh of relief that Hiyori and Yuuto hadn’t come their way, the pair followed after them again.

“Looks like they’ve finished their shopping.”

“That’s a pretty big paper bag they’re carrying there.” Rather than cutesy shops that looked like they would cater to young girls, the pair had made their rounds to nothing but men’s shops—perhaps they were out today shopping for Yuuto instead.

“That kid’s a sharp one, having the sense to open doors for her and escort her through at his age.”

“Yeah.” If Yokozawa were to be grading Yuuto on his behavior today, he’d have to give the kid pretty high marks. He probably couldn’t have won if this had been a competition. “Looks like they’re stopping for lunch now.” The pair were heading for the cafe and food court area, their little legs likely tired from all the running around.

“Damn, that late already? I’m starving myself, now that I think about it—wanna get something ourselves?”

“Get *what*? We can’t go into any of these restaurants.”

“They’re not going anywhere for a while. Here, I’ll go get us something, so you wait here on this bench.”

“Oi—where the hell are you—dammit... He never listens to a word people say...” Yokozawa trailed off, muttering to himself as he settled down on the bench. From what he’d seen of Hiyori and Yuuto, there probably was no need to worry. Hiyori wouldn’t break her curfew, and Yuuto was behaving like a proper gentleman.

“Sorry for the wait. Gotta have this on a date, right?” Kirishima announced on his return, a crepe held in either hand.

“The hell is this?” He unthinkingly accepted the crepe Kirishima offered him.

“The strawberry chocolate special. There’re strawberries, chocolate, strawberry ice cream, brownie—and some whipped cream too. I got a tuna-cream cheese one for myself.”

“Then give me that one!” It wasn’t that he disliked sweets; he just didn’t want to eat something so overwhelmingly sweet for lunch.

“C’mon, it’s cute, isn’t it?”

“Who gives a shit about that?”

“It’s gonna melt if you don’t hurry up and eat it.”

“Ugh—it’s your fault for buying something with ice cream in it!” he snapped, biting into the crepe in a panic as the ice cream began to drip down, just as Kirishima had warned.

“Give me a break—I just wanted to try buying it for once.”

“Then *you* eat it.”

“Well you do realize that if we trade now, it counts as an indirect kiss, right?”

“...I’m fine with eating this, then.” He was dubious about how appropriate it was for two men their age to be sitting around eating crepes together, but he couldn’t let food go to waste—but so focused was he on maintaining a hold on his crepe with one hand while fending off Kirishima’s teasing swipes with the other that he completely forgot to be wary of their surroundings.

“...What’re you two doing, Dad?”

“.....!!” Yokozawa felt the blood drain from his face in an instant at Hiyori’s voice from behind them, all their efforts to keep from being spotted now having gone to waste.

But in contrast to Yokozawa’s own agitation, Kirishima appeared cool as a cucumber. “Well well, if it isn’t Hiyō! Fancy running into you here.”

“Are you here shopping too? Didn’t you say you had work to do?”

“Nah—we’re on a date.”

“N–NO WE’RE NOT. We’re here for *work*! Data collection! Yeah, I’m just tagging along helping your dad gather some information!” Yokozawa fired off as explanation, spotting the camera in Kirishima’s hand.

Luckily for him, Hiyori proceeded to draw a helpful–albeit incorrect–conclusion. “Ah–are you here taking more pictures for manga?”

“Exactly! One of his authors asked us to, y’see!” He cast a harsh glare over at Kirishima to his side, at a loss as to why he was the only one having to think up these wild excuses, but the guy simply played dumb.

“Ah–um...g–good afternoon...” Yuuto, expression even more awkward and abashed than Yokozawa’s, greeted from Hiyori’s side, having mustered up every ounce of his courage it seemed. He likely hadn’t remotely expected to be faced with the father of the girl he had a crush on in the middle of their date.

“Hi there. Thanks for looking after Hiyori today.”

“Oh no, the pleasure’s all mine! I’m always finding myself indebted to Kirishima-san!” he returned stiffly, back stretched up tall, and Kirishima turned a mature expression on him.

“You’re sure she’s not being selfish and needy and making a nuisance of herself?”

“Absolutely not! I’m the one always causing her trouble!” The kid was absolutely rigid with nerves—but then, *anyone* suffering such intense attention from the father of the girl they liked would probably wither in place.

“So Hiyo—what’re your plans now?”

“Well we finished shopping and just had lunch, so we were trying to decide what to do next.”

“Then—why not go see a movie?”

“You don’t mind? If we do—I might be a little later than I said in getting home. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Just give me a call when it’s over. How does that sound, Iokawa-kun?”

“It’s totally fine with me!”

“Then be sure to contact your folks before the movie starts. Got enough cash on you, Hiyo?”

“Yup, I’m fine.”

Her attitude while interacting with Kirishima was the same as usual, but for some reason she just wouldn’t look Yokozawa in the eye. But if they didn’t resolve things between them here and now, things would only get worse, Yokozawa determined, and he worked up the nerve to call out to her. “Hiyo, I’m—sorry. About the other day.”

“Huh...?”

“It was really insensitive of me.”

“I’m not mad at you anymore. It was just a tantrum,” she responded with a shy smile when Yokozawa apologized for not revealing his birthday sooner. It’d been days since he’d seen her smile, and he felt a great weight lift from his shoulders. “But I’m sorry too. It wasn’t very mature of me at all to get mad at you like that.”

“Nah—I deserved it for not practicing a little tact.”

“Good for you—making nice again like that!”
Kirishima jumped in, slapping Yokozawa across the back.

“Oww!” He typically would’ve sought his revenge for this action, but he couldn’t embarrass himself like this in front of Hiyori’s friend.

“Hey, Oniichan—are you free tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Well, yeah, but—”

“Then come over to our place at 12, okay??
No sooner, and no later!”

“O—okay?” he nodded dumbly, frozen by the sudden request.

“Well, you two do your best with work,
then! Let’s go, Iokawa-kun!”

“Umm, well, goodbye!” Yuuto bowed his head politely before jogging off after Hiyori in the direction of the theater complex.

After seeing the pair off, Yokozawa wondered, “...Why noon?”

“Beats me—but you’d better do as she says.
Now then—shall we continue our own little date?”

“I keep telling you, it’s *not* a date,” he snapped as Kirishima brazenly draped an arm over his shoulders, shaking off the attention. He could feel the heavy gazes of girls watching them as they passed by but stoically strode forward, trying to appear as if he hadn’t noticed.

“Hey, where’re you going, Takafumi?”

“.....” He knew he’d lose if he responded, and fighting back the urge to unleash his irritation upon Kirishima, he simply focused on moving forward.

Despite being told to come at noon, Yokozawa seemed to have gotten ahead of himself and arrived a full thirty minutes early. With nothing else to do, he’d settled on a bench on the complex grounds to kill time, and with five minutes left to go, he boarded the elevator.

“What’d she mean by ‘no sooner and no later’?” Hiyori had sent him a reminder e-mail the previous evening, instructing him to be sure to come empty-handed—which just made things all the more confusing, but ultimately deciding that he’d find out when he arrived, he made for Kirishima’s

apartment, pressing the intercom buzzer nervously.

“.....?” They usually answered immediately, but for some reason, there was no response today, and just as he was considering pressing the buzzer again, the front door flew open with a great burst of noise.

“Happy birthday!!”

“Wh-what?” He took a few measured steps back at the popping sound, but on closer inspection, he realized there were rainbow-colored confetti streamers floating down around him.

“They’re crackers! Pretty standard stuff, wouldn’t you say?”

“Stan...dard...?”

At Yokozawa’s utterly baffled expression, clearly not understanding what was going on, Kirishima returned with a huff, “It’s a three-months-late belated birthday party, of course! Are you telling me you seriously didn’t suspect anything?”

“N-not at all.”

“Luck us, huh Hiyo? Looks like the surprise went off without a hitch!” Hiyori darted forward to tug Yokozawa inside as he stood in the foyer gaping stupidly, urging him to hurry.

“Oniichan, this way!”

“Wai—what is all this?” The living room he’d been pulled into was all decked out with party decorations. The cake on the table was very obviously homemade, with the nameplate—made out of cookies, it seemed—displaying ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY’.

“Hiyo—you made all this?”

“Yup, all by myself! I practiced at Grandma’s place all last week!”

“She really wanted to keep it a secret, so that’s why she didn’t have time to text you,” Kirishima explained, leaving Hiyori looking a bit bashful.

“So that’s why...”

“Well if you found out, it wouldn’t have been a surprise! I’m really sorry, though—for not responding to your messages!”

Realizing that the whole time Yokozawa had been getting all worked up, Hiyori had been

doing all this stuff just for him, his chest twinged with heat. This also meant that Kirishima had known exactly what was going on when Yokozawa had tried to consult him about Hiyori; the reason he hadn't even tried to seriously listen to Yokozawa, changing the subject at every opportunity, must have been because he knew what she was planning.

He was so overcome with emotion right now, he couldn't find the words to express himself—and it was here that Hiyori shyly pressed a wrapped box, tied up with a ribbon, into his hands. “And...here, this too!”

“This is...for me?”

She nodded, bashful. “Yup—so open it! I really hope you like it...”

He did as she suggested, heart pounding as she looked on with eyes full of both hope and suspense. “Given that it's something you picked out, there's no way I won't li—a...t-shirt?”

“After thinking it over, I thought something you might normally use would be best.”

“Thanks, Hiyo—I'm thrilled, seriously.”

“Hehe! Well you’re very welcome, then!
See how it looks! If it doesn’t fit, the people
at the store said you can exchange it.”

The shirt had a design that would probably
have suited someone a bit younger—but it
wasn’t bad at all, and although a bit
embarrassed to do so, he complied with her
request and held up the shirt to assess its fit.
“What do you think?”

“It looks great! And the size looks perfect,
too—thank goodness!”

“I’ll be sure to take good care of it.” He’d
never been gifted clothes as a present before,
and while receiving a gift was in and of
itself reason to be happy, he appreciated
Hiyori’s thoughtfulness as she worked hard
to pick out something for him even more.

“Actually...I didn’t really know what to get
you myself...so I asked Iokawa-kun to help
me pick something out!”

“I see...” It seemed the reason she’d
referred to the outing as ‘shopping’ rather
than ‘a date’ was because she’d had a clear
purpose in going to the mall. While
Yokozawa wasn’t sure what Yuuto had seen
their trip as, Hiyori had obviously been more

concerned with buying him a present than anything else.

“When I ran into you and Dad yesterday, I was really worried you might find out about the birthday celebration! Oh—by the way, did you manage to get some good pictures?”

“Oh—uh, yeah! Totally, got some great shots. Right?” He only just recalled that he’d excused his and Kirishima’s appearance together as an outing to gather reference pictures for a mangaka. What if she wanted to see some of the shots, though? He reflexively cast a glance Kirishima’s way, seeking aid.

“Absolutely. Got a ton of great pictures.”

Hiyori, still in high spirits, pulled out a similar wrapped present here and held it out. Apparently she’d had it sitting on a chair, hidden from view. “Actually...I got something for you too, Dad!”

“For me?” It seemed she’d planned a little surprise for her father as well, and Kirishima, who’d been sitting beside her with a smug expression the whole time, reacted with wide eyes when she held the gift out for him.

“I thought it’d look really nice on you too, so consider it special, this year only!”

“On me *too*?”

“Just hurry up and open it already!”

At her urging, he tugged the ribbon loose and pulled out another t-shirt from the packaging. “Hey look, now Yokozawa and I match!”

“Yup! I wasn’t sure which color would be best—but I’m glad I went with this one.”

Yokozawa’s had been a navy one, while Kirishima’s had a black background. He quickly held up the shirt to his body for Hiyori’s perusal. In Yokozawa’s view, it suited him quite well.

However, much as he enjoyed Hiyori’s smile and good will, he couldn’t bring himself to rejoice in the fact that he now owned *another* item that was part of a pair with something of Kirishima’s. He’d probably have to make sure he didn’t wear it anywhere he might run into Kirishima. At least that way, they could avoid any unwitting instances of ‘pair looks’, where couples showed up wearing matching clothes.

As if he could see Yokozawa's thought process, though, Kirishima piped up with a wide grin on his face, "We'll have to make sure we're wearing these next time we go out, huh, Yokozawa?"

"The hell we—" he started to reject the idea outright, but then quickly remembered they were in front of Hiyori and scaled his lips. He usually would've voiced his objection here, but he couldn't bring himself to do so in front of Hiyori, and taking in Yokozawa's conflicting feelings, Kirishima just looked on, leering. Yokozawa therefore opted to just give Kirishima's shin a poke in place of opening his mouth.

"Oniichan, have a seat! I couldn't make a grand feast like you, but Dad and I still prepared a little something together!"

"Together?"

"Admittedly, all I did was slice up some vegetables."

As he settled down in the chair Kirishima had pulled out for him, Hiyori brought in salad, soup, and pasta. "You really went all out."

"Right??" Hiyori beamed at his compliment.

“Well, shall we toast?” Kirishima filled the champagne flutes placed before them with ginger ale.

“Happy birthday, Oniichan!” They brought their glasses together with a musical *clink* before downing the contents.

This three-months-late birthday party would likely be one Yokozawa would never forget, and he felt a bit overcome with emotion in the face of such a quiet, happy afternoon.

THE END

1

See Also...

Be sure to check out the prequels, Volumes 1, 2, and 3!